

April 9<sup>th</sup> 1968 and I get the call: Can I play in goal for Lakenheath 1<sup>st</sup> team away at Attleborough Town, 6:45 kick off? Fred, the first team goalkeeper is injured,, and Ronnie the reserves keeper is away with work. Can I play? Hell yes! I am 15 years old and at Tech school in Bury so I have to get mother to pick me up, race home, collect my boots and away on the bus to Attleborough. I can't remember much about the game apart from having to make a couple of decent saves and the score...a 1-1 draw. The defence in front of me were, if I remember correctly, Les Thurlbourne, Richard 'Dickie' Bond, John 'Painter' Pugh and my brother Trevor ( probably the best player I've ever seen in a Lakenheath shirt.) I was really chuffed after the game with all the lads patting me on the back and telling me how well I'd played. The reporter from the local football paper the 'Pink Un' came over to interview me, "Brilliant!" I thought, but just at that moment Jack Mann our club secretary/manager interrupts "You go and get changed, I'll answer the reporter's questions." I felt really good as we headed home on the bus stopping on the way at Larling Angel pub. The lads queued up to buy me a lemonade!!!. I'm definitely in the big time!!

I couldn't wait for Saturday. Fred was back in goal but the players invited me along to watch and we stopped again on the way home for a drink and fish and chips in Fakenham. I rushed to get a copy of the 'Pink Un' to read about the previous week's matches. There it was Attleborough 1 Lakenheath 1. The write up began "Young Fred Wootton in the Lakenheath goal had a tremendous game and is definitely one to keep an eye on as he has a great future ahead.". WHAT? Young Fred? I went straight to Jack to complain, he said he was very sorry but explained that firstly I was not signed on, and secondly you have to be sixteen to play senior football, so there was no way he could give them my real name! Talk about deflated, but as Jack said; "A least we all know who they were talking about."

This was not my first encounter with Lakenheath F.C. nor with Jack Mann. Jack, along with various other helpers was Mr. Lakenheath F.C. and he was also the deputy head at Lakenheath Primary School. When I was around seven or eight years old and before the school had its own grass playing field, Jack would march us boys who were keen on football, once a week, all the way down to "The Pit" Lakenheath's ground, to have a kick around for about fifteen minutes then walk us all the way back to school. It took longer to walk there and back than actual time playing! We didn't care and couldn't wait for our trips to "The Pit", bootlaces tied together and slung round our necks, and one of given the honour of carrying the ball!! We were footballers, champions of the world and we wanted every passing car to see our boots and recognise us as 'proper' footballers! Those were the days!! On a Sunday we would again all be down 'The Pit' watching and playing behind the goals. A lot of the time I would stand watching Roy Mackender in the Lakenheath goal. He was somewhat of a hero of mine, and I think that's about the time I realised I wanted to be a goalie and hopefully, one day, be as good as Roy.

If I remember rightly I only played one more game for the reserves as the season was almost at an end. The 1968-69 season began with the customary trial match where all the previous seasons players who had re-signed for the club plus any new players and up and coming youngsters could come along and play to see if they were good enough to sign on. I was told to bring my boots and as the game kicked off was told that I would be playing the second half. Our opponents that day were Thetford Rovers and they had some very good players including the famous Thetford footballing family Percy James and his two sons Ron and David. Now Percy, a great big barrel-chested centre forward, was in the twilight of his career, but was still a force to be reckoned with. The second half kicked off and our centre half, John 'Painter' Pugh was handling Percy very well until midway through the half Percy slipped through and as I came out and dived at his feet, (I was a brave little bugger!) he slid the ball past me. As he went round me I grabbed his ankle and down he went in a cloud of dust. The crowd roared their approval and even his two sons stood in the middle of the pitch laughing.

All I could hear was Percy snorting and grunting like an enraged bull as he steamed towards me then just as I was expecting a huge wallop I heard 'Painter' shout "Leave him alone Percy, he's only a boy". Phew! Thanks Painter. The referee duly awarded a penalty and of course Percy stepped up to take it. To add insult to injury I saved the penalty!! The rest of the game thankfully passed without incident. I had survived.

My next game came the very next day when David Kent who played in the middle for Lakenheath phoned me and asked if I would play for Northcourt F.C. his Sunday side as they were short of a keeper. Didn't even have to think about that one "Hell yes", I said. He came and picked me up and explained we were playing a works team, AC Dynamo on Thetford Town's ground. This really was the big time!! I was introduced to the Northcourt lads and couldn't wait to get out on the pitch. I soon changed my mind. When we went out to warm up who did I see? You guessed it, centre forward for AC Dynamo was none other than Percy James. As we warmed up he trotted the length of the pitch, put his hand on my shoulder, looked around and said "You've not got Painter to look after you today boy". I was bricking it. Thankfully we were the better side and won comfortably. I only had a couple of decent saves to make and kept a clean sheet. In fairness to Percy, after the game he came over and shook my hand, wished me well for the future and told me he thought I'd be "A good un!"

That 1968-69 season saw me cement my place in the reserves as first choice keeper, and another game came to mind where Painter again came to my rescue. It was an evening game, a cup match against a Bury side, Northbury F.C. who as anyone from around that time will remember were not only a very good side who regularly won the Bury league, but they were also a bloody hard, some would say dirty, side. They were likened at the time to Leeds Utd. In how they intimidated teams and players. They played behind the Greengage pub in Bury, and although we fielded a couple of first team players it was a very tight game. With just minutes to go and leading 1-0 we were of course wasting time whenever we could. The ball went out for a goal kick and as I was in no hurry to get the ball their centre forward ran past me, picked it up and threw it to me. I of course bent down to pick it up but let it roll past me to waste a few more precious seconds. It went to another of their players who kicked it back towards me and again I let it roll past me. At this point the centre forward picked the ball up, shoved it into my chest and roared, "If you don't soon take the goal kick I'll stick this \*\*\*\*\*ball up your\*\*\*\*\*arse!" Painter's arm was straight round his neck. He pulled him away and told him exactly what he'd do to him if he came near me again. Thanks again Painter. That was the start of my career and on April 8<sup>th</sup> this year it will be my 50<sup>th</sup> year associated with Lakenheath and I'm still heavily involved with the club. They say that if you cut me in half I'd be like a stick of rock with Lakenheath F.C. and Man. Utd F.C. running right through me.

The next season saw a remarkable achievement in the history of the club. After a good season with the reserves I was now the first team keeper and loving life. At the same time we had some very good young players in and around the club and so had the makings of a very good youth side. So it was we entered the Suffolk Minor Cup. This was an under 18 competition and usually won by teams from Bury Town, Lowestoft Town Sudbury places much bigger and with far more choice than Lakenheath. However throughout the season we got better and better and suddenly we were in the semi finals against Stowmarket Town. We were drawn away, but against all the odds we won 3-1 and were always in control. So here we were the first Lakenheath side to ever reach the final of the Minor Cup. The final was played at the ICI sports ground in Stowmarket and we were against Lowestoft Town. That day the local newspaper was full of how they were favourites to win and had pictures and interviews with all their players. Well what do you know, we won by the odd goal after extra time to bring the first Count Cup home to the 'Heath'. We really were champions of the world!



I have already mentioned in passing some of the memorable players and characters I had the privilege of playing with over the years. Les Thurlbourne was not only a terrific full back he was also a first class wind up merchant. He would be in his opponent's ear non stop the whole match, trying to put him off, and little has changed over the years. Now in his eighties he still comes to every game home and away and still gives any opponent close enough to hear the benefit of his opinion and they still bite. Les is a one off, they don't make 'em like that any more. Then there was Richard 'Dickie' Bond a great big centre half and a great servant of the club. John 'Painter' Pugh, who I've mentioned before, was his partner in the middle of the back four and was the 'brain' of the operation, directing everyone including the ref. he never shut up from the start to the final whistle. My brother Trevor at right back was nothing short of brilliant and I'm convinced that only injury prevented him from playing at a higher level. Possibly even professional. He captained West Suffolk and full Suffolk sides as a school boy and played for Suffolk Youths. He was taken on by Cambridge City and in those days they were the top side in Cambridge. They sent a taxi to take him to training every week. Unfortunately he suffered a double fracture to his ankle when he was nineteen, a really nasty injury and although he was still a brilliant left back he was never quite the same again. Barry 'Woody' Reeve was another gifted player around this time, a tricky little winger who made it look easy but he never stopped moaning at us youngsters. Michael 'Muddy' Cooper was another great talent; he would even tell the keeper where he was going to put the ball but they still couldn't get near it. Henry Morley, tough as they come, Mel Whitta, a great centre forward, Horry Parsons another speedy bustling forward, Ken 'Grumps' Hatchley tough as they come. Then there was Gwynne Chambers, what a player, tough but very intelligent. A little story about Gwynne has stayed in my memory over the years: When playing away in Norwich or Yarmouth we would always stop for 'drinks' either in town or on the way home. On one particular trip, in the middle of Winter when it was dark by about 4.30, we'd been to the pub and Gwynne had downed more than his fair share, so on the way home he announced that he was desperate to go to the loo. As we were nowhere near any public toilets the bus driver pulled over and said Gwynne would have to manage by the side of the road. So, bearing in mind it was pitch black in the middle of nowhere, we pulled up by the grass verge. The doors opened and Gwynne leapt from the bus. Unbeknown to him, or any one else, we had stopped next to a ditch and Gwynne slid straight down into a foot of water. Unperturbed, and with the whole bus laughing at him he carried on as if nothing had happened; there he stood in the middle of the ditch having his much needed wee!! On another occasion when celebrating a cup win and after a few too many drinks and some goading from his team mates he agreed to streak along the High Street to the Co op and back. Off he set but while he was gone his clothes were hidden. On his return, unable to find them, he simply stood at the bar stark naked and continued to drink his pint. Gwynne was definitely a 'one off'. We also had some decent players in the reserves. Anthony 'Starry' Starr I think still hold the club record for goals scored in a season. Bill Smith, always played with a smile on his face. Derek Leader another tough tackler, but the nicest guy you could ever meet. Mick Finn, they didn't come any tougher. Mick Wootton, daft as a brush but a terrific full back and would certainly have been in the first team but for Trevor and Les Thurlbourne. They are just a few of the lads I have played with over the years and there have of course been many other top players both before and since.

The first team had very little success during the time I played. We were runners up in the Anglian Combination Div. 2 cup and achieved two promotions as runners up. The reserves had two league cup wins and one league win in the Bury and district League. In the mid nineties we joined the Cambs League and over the past few years have had more success winning the Cambs Senior A league followed by the Premier league. Our greatest and proudest moment in recent times came in 2015 when we won the Suffolk Senior Cup for the first time in the club's history. Also runners up in 2011. All in all the last few years have

been fairly successful for the club and we hope to move onwards and upwards in the future.

The club was formed around 1907/08 and I believe played their matches behind where the old British Legion stands. It moved to it's present location known as 'The Pit' after the second world war, but I am unsure of the actual date. The 'pit' was a chalk quarry owned by Sir Charlton Briscoe who leased it to the club. There is literally only about six inches of top soil on the pitch on top of the chalk. When I was a lad only a few trees grew at each end, the rest was chalk walls. The stand was built in the mid fifties. There was one large wooden changing room, with one toilet and a tin urinal at the back. Mrs. Mann and Susan Parsons served teas from a little green hut. When Sir Charlton died the ground was to go to auction in London where his son lived. Jack Mann, Lionel Allsop and others raised funds with the intention of going to the auction to try and buy the ground, but at the eleventh hour Sir Charlton's son contacted the club saying his father would have wanted the club to stay there and offered to sell it for either £100 or £150 plus £10 solicitor's costs. So we got the whole place for either £110 or £160. (I can't remember the exact amount, Jack did tell me, but it was a bargain.) We are one of the few clubs who actually own their ground and are the envy of most visiting clubs locally. They will tell you they love playing down 'The Pit' where we have a clubhouse and bar and modern changing rooms and facilities.

I've loved my time at the 'Heath' and apart from a few bad results and a broken arm I wouldn't change a thing. I've had a fantastic football life as a player, manager and official of this great little club and met some memorable characters and players down the years. I'm still involved with the 'Heath' as assistant to the first team manager, and proud that I started in the first team and will hopefully end with the first team. I'm not planning on going anywhere just yet, but I think it is time that some of the younger generation got involved as I did when I stopped playing.

ALAN GYTE