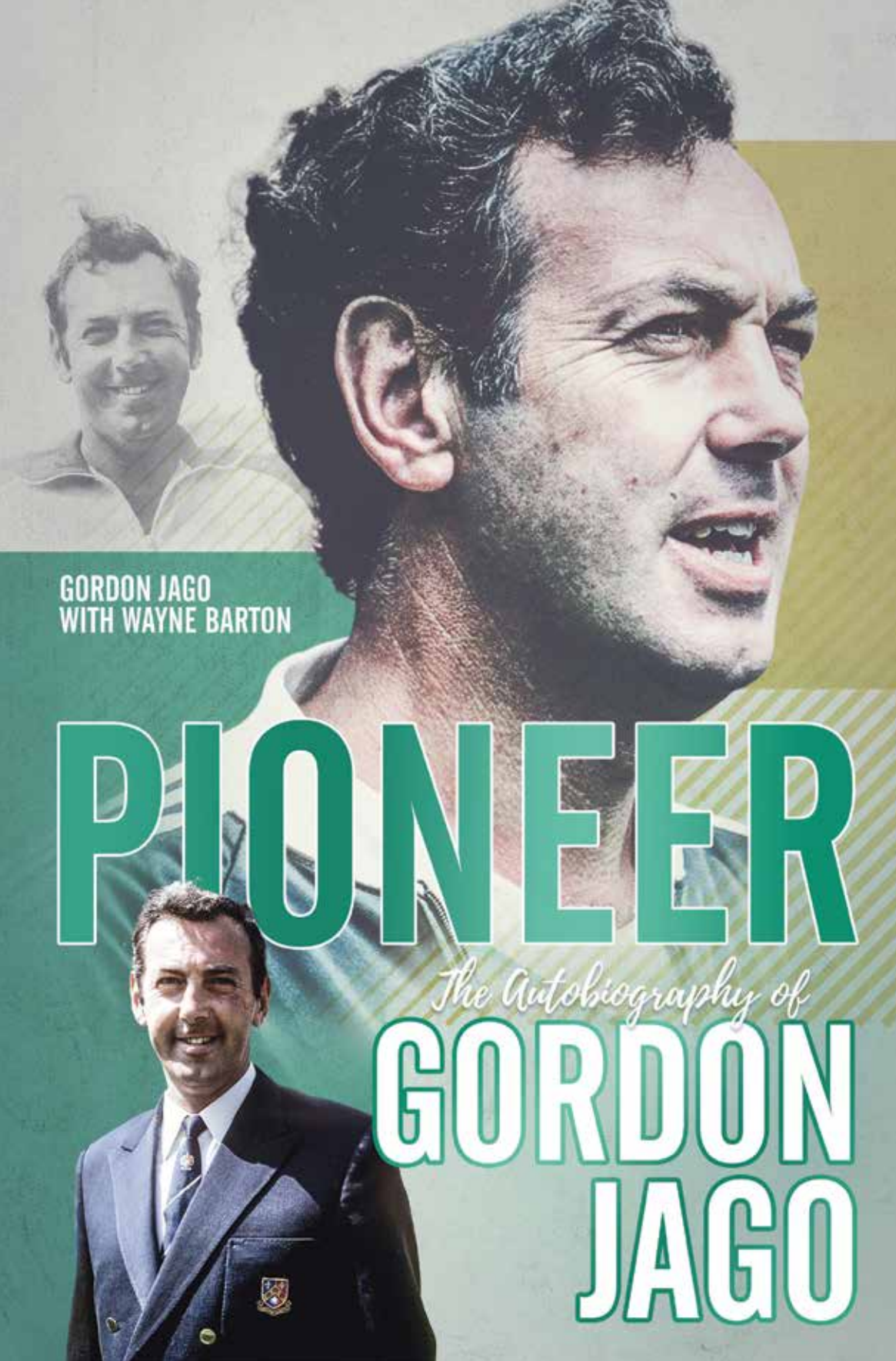

GORDON JAGO
WITH WAYNE BARTON

PIONEER

The Autobiography of

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pitch

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WAR CHILD

MY EARLIEST memories are of standing in a bomb shelter at the end of our garden, watching bombs from German planes rain down on the capital.

I was born in Poplar, East London, but was raised on a council estate in Dagenham. In spite of the Blitz, because of Dad's job, we had to move *in* to London, so we moved to Plaistow, which is near West Ham – being near the Boleyn Ground seemed exciting for me at the time, having been raised a Hammers fan. Dad would take me with five or six of his workmates and their children to their matches.

Our home wasn't far from the London Docks. One evening, the Germans dropped what seemed like millions of incendiary bombs over the city. London was set alight and, standing at the edge of the garden, Dad held me as we observed the strange red glow that illuminated the

landscape as far as we could see. Though we had a house, we really lived in the shelter. They were fairly comfortable – we had some electricity, some heat. Maybe because I was so young it made it easier – these things that were beyond comprehension were, in actual fact, much too difficult for a child as young as I was *to* comprehend, so in the main there was an obliviousness that I have to be thankful for. The searchlights, the gunfire, the explosions, the sound of the German planes … I can't say that it was fun, of course I knew that it wasn't, but I was too young for these memories to plague me as the traumatic experiences that they undoubtedly naturally became for others.

The pressure of war wasn't on the kids, it was on the parents, but you only understand this properly when you're older. I didn't realise it was a matter of life and death. If you saw a German plane being hit, then you would hear everyone in the bomb shelters down your row start to cheer, and you, of course, would join in. When a British plane was hit, there was a silence, an eerie silence. It was a pause to see if you could see the parachute, and if you knew the pilot had made it out then another cheer went up. The memories are still tremendously vivid but the impact of them weren't as strong as they might have been, mercifully.

Going to school was a difficult experience, however; the part of our life where the reality really did hit. Our school was three storeys high, with a bomb shelter underneath in case of raids through the day. There were plenty of daylight raids at the beginning of the war.

Each kid was given a little red Oxo gravy box, which we put our name on, containing a pack of raisins, biscuits, and some Cadbury's chocolate. The idea was that if we were bombed, then we had some food if we were trapped, and at a time when food was rationed, we never saw chocolate. There was a scene in the 1987 film *Hope and Glory*, which was about the Blitz, and I can't help but feel that somebody involved in telling that story must have gone to the same school as I did – one morning, when we went to school, we discovered that it had been hit and destroyed.

Rubble, everywhere. So, as young children, what's our immediate thought? The chocolate! There were four or five of us, right into the rubble, scavenging for the boxes, regardless of whose name was on it. No sooner had we got in there than we heard loud police whistles and then the sound of the police telling us to get out. Of course, we were a danger to ourselves. What was remaining of the school could easily have collapsed on us and we could have got trapped under the rubble ourselves.

After that, we had to go to school in a church. Because there was obviously not nearly enough room to house all the children at once, you would tend to only go in the morning or afternoon. Sometimes, you would go into school and the seat next to you would be empty. You quickly came to understand that they wouldn't be coming back. A casualty of a bombing raid.

My father told me years afterwards that he had a premonition. He was worried about getting bombed. Extremely worried. Someone from his factory had transferred from Welling in Kent to Wales and he had told Dad that we could have his house for the duration of the war, so we moved. We were there two weeks when we learned there was a direct hit on our houses back in Plaistow. Our neighbours had been in their bomb shelters but were all killed. We went back to visit relatives in the area a couple of months later and where our house once was now stood an auxiliary water tank.

Now in Kent, or as we thought, 'the countryside', having thought we had at least 'escaped' the Blitz, we instead had moved right into prime position to be struck by doodlebugs, which was what the V1 flying bombs were called. We were in the direct line. You would see them coming, and if they were above you, you could almost

breathe a sigh of relief (if, indeed, that's the appropriate term) because you knew it would glide and it would move further inland, as horrid as that thought was. But if the jet engine cut out before they reached the land, then there was panic, a worry that there was about to be an immediate impact, and a scramble to get into the shelters ensued.

Being the grand old age I am, there are not many of us with these stories to tell, and fewer still in the United States of America, where I've made my home in later life. And isn't it strange how, as time passes and we grow older, these stories told in the developed voice (but seen and experienced, nonetheless, through the eyes and ears of a child) maintain some of that nostalgia, as if to somewhat dilute the horror of it all.

When I decided to write my autobiography I had wonderful input from my good friends, many who had their own suggestions as to how it should begin, which stories I should tell, and so on and so forth. It's obvious, however, having enjoyed such longevity (regardless of whether or not these stories are of interest!), in the main, it has to be told in a chronological fashion.

However, it would be remiss of me not to mention one such instance. I was on a Dallas radio show with a good friend of mine with the purpose of talking about soccer but

he asked about what it was like growing up in the war, and I, of course, duly obliged with stories like the above. And the strangest thing happened – I was contacted by schools that had that part of history on their current curriculum and they invited me to visit them and to talk to their classes.

Until the 11 September 2001 attacks, the US had never suffered an attack that could be comparable to what we experienced in the Blitz, and at least in terms of it being a longer period of time over a greater area, one can reason that the Second World War logically had a prolonged, acute impact on society. We lived without windows – we had put sheets there when our windows were blown out.

I accepted the invitations to give presentations at schools and did my own research; I put together a small video and learned facts and figures myself about the number of planes shot down and so on, so that I would be prepared. But when I got to the school, I learned that the class was of under-12-year-olds. I thought that not only was what I had prepared probably a little too bleak, but, just as it did to me at the time, it would likely just go over their heads.

I showed them the video tape and instead of going through all these numbers, I related my own stories and memories. To explain to a youngster that they were lucky

to have their classmates, that during the war they might not come back, was something that I think they could relate to.

I don't feel it was too traumatic – they learned a lot, I think, and remained engaged with the stories I told. It must have gone much better than I realised as, soon after, I was inundated with similar requests from other schools. I accepted about four or five, although my real intention going on the radio show in the first place was to promote the Dallas Sidekicks! I still tried to continue to do that on the school visits.

The children varied in age and when I was giving the talk to a class of 17-year-olds, I was presented with several very interesting questions. They were studying European history, so I was able to give my thoughts about the bravery of the many pilots who had flown in from all over the world to help fight the Germans. I shared my own experiences of how the war had presented me with my first exposure to American sport, after we visited a holiday camp in Middlesex and saw some US Army soldiers playing baseball.

I was a fairly well-educated and well-rounded young boy. Particularly considering the events of my childhood, I have to say that my parents (and teachers) did a great job. But I was more of a 'technical school' student than I was a

grammar school one. I took the grammar school test when I was 11 and didn't pass. I took the technical test when I was 12 and did pass, so I went to Erith Technical School.

There were many things, events and occurrences in my early life that I believe stood me in good stead for how I would be as a person later on. The times we lived through made us fully appreciative of the value of things we had and how easily they could be lost; and, subsequently, how hard one must work for the luxuries we had in life. We were working class, never anything grandiose.

Like many boys, soccer, or football, presented an opportunity, an escapism. From those days on the terraces with my father at West Ham, to playing with my friends out on the street, and then playing my first real organised matches at the age of 12, when I was called up for the school team at Welling Secondary Modern School. At 14, I was picked for the North Kent Schools, which led to me then being picked to represent Kent. In my school side I played as an inside-forward and scored a good number of goals.

Erith Technical School were members of the London School Association, so I was eligible to play for the city's team too. I played for London County Schoolboys against Glasgow Schools and I think I may well be the only person ever to have played in three of those matches, because they

happened only annually. One year, we played two inter-city matches, one at Hampden Park, in Glasgow, and one at West Ham, London. For the second match, I was selected as captain of the team. It was a proud moment for me to lead out the team at West Ham United's ground – my boyhood favourite team.

From then I got the opportunity to play for Dulwich Hamlet Under-16s, one of the biggest amateur clubs in the country. While there, I was called up to play for Surrey – continuing my tour of the Home Counties. When I arrived at the district trials, my position was moved – the master in charge noted that I was the tallest boy, so he played me at centre-half. It's a trap that schoolteachers often fell into, and a theory that I don't subscribe to at all, but on this occasion it worked out for the best. Could I have made it as a professional as an inside-forward? I'll never know.

When I was 17, I was invited to sign for both Charlton Athletic and Tottenham Hotspur. It was an opportunity I wasn't going to turn down, and even the choice between the clubs was made relatively straightforward for me as there was a London bus strike on the day I was supposed to sign for Tottenham, so I was unable to make the journey! I signed as an amateur at Charlton, who immediately sent me on loan to an amateur club in Kent – Maidstone United.

It was a steady yet admittedly steep rise but I didn't get carried away and that attitude must have helped as my local reputation began to rise further still, and while with Maidstone I was selected for the England youth team. I played in six international matches, against Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and then in a tournament in Nice, where we played against Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

These opportunities were as fantastic as you would expect for a boy of 15, 16 and 17, but the truth was – as staggering as it may seem to some to read – that wanting to be a professional footballer was all well and good but it wasn't a profession that paid anywhere near the staggering amounts of today, and that's even accounting for inflation and the comparison with other jobs.

After I finished at Erith Tech, Dad encouraged me to learn a trade, so I took an apprenticeship as a telecommunications engineer for two years, learning the occupation while on loan to Maidstone. I knew of a lot of young men who neglected their education and their studies to pursue their dream of playing football, and if it didn't work out, they struggled. They had no formal education, so it was difficult for them to establish a career afterwards. I was determined the same wouldn't happen to me.

When I was of age to sign as a professional, I was also of age to enlist in National Service, so I signed as a part-time professional at Charlton and they arranged for me to be posted to Portsmouth so that I could still play. I played in the second team, mostly, but I was getting £6 a week, which was a strong, healthy wage.

It was compulsory at that time to be called up. With my experience, I should have gone into the Royal Corps of Signals, but I was told by Charlton Athletic to apply for the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. When I went to enlist, they tried to get me to go into the Royal Corp of Signals, but when they realised I was hoping to be a footballer, they relented – apparently, it was something that was agreed with most professional soccer clubs and certain areas of the army. I had my interview and told Jimmy Seed, the manager at The Valley, that they were thinking of putting me in a different area, so he called their military contact and sorted it out for me. I was in Portsmouth for 18 months, allowed to come home every weekend and play for Charlton too.

When my time in the army was finished, I had to make a decision: do I go back to telecommunications or do I take that gamble of being a professional footballer?

Jimmy Seed had told me in no uncertain terms that I wouldn't make the first team as a part-time

professional because I simply wouldn't have the fitness and conditioning of a full-time player. I supposed there was an implied encouragement there, that if I took the plunge, I could be relatively assured of at least being given a proper chance.

I felt I had earned it, though. I had certainly worked my way around the amateur and semi-professional scene, and once I was established into a proper position – centre-half because I was a tall boy – then I think it's fair to say that my confidence grew too. From playing there often, I gather that someone along the way felt that I had good leadership qualities, or good organisational skills, because I was often named captain of whatever team I played in. I captained North Kent, Kent, London, Surrey Schools and the England Youth XI. I always found that interesting because I wasn't a shouter. I wasn't the most social of players, and maybe that was something identified by the coaches, that I could separate myself from that emotion and focus on the instruction.

I had good teachers who helped to keep me grounded, and my father, too, was careful to make sure I didn't get big-headed by the quick success I enjoyed at a young age. You could understand that I might – being captain of England youth teams; my, what an honour!

I knew that my parents were proud of me and I think my sister was a little resentful, or annoyed at least, of the attention I got. My mum and dad would always go to see me wherever I played, so that attention focused solely on me was attention she was deprived of. I could understand that, and I also understand that she wasn't hateful towards me, she was simply frustrated with how things were. Perhaps my parents should have paid more attention to my sister … I'm not saying they were wrong, or did anything wrong, I just think that they neglected the opportunity to compensate for that lost attention, and at times it showed. It was a lesson I carried with me through to later life and one I was frequently reminded of by my wife, June. Whenever our friends were blessed with a new arrival, if we went to visit and they had an elder child, I always made a point of first dedicating some attention to the elder one before going to the baby. I think these mistakes – little errors of judgement, shall we call them – are done inadvertently, but it was always on my mind to ensure I remained thoughtful at all times.

Funny then, given what I've just said, that a little later on, after I married and was playing professionally, when my father watched me play he became very critical. My wife said, many years after that, that she felt he was wrong, that

he had gone too far with his criticism. I wouldn't have said that I was a 'mother's boy' as such but I'm not sure Mum ever took to June (or any previous girlfriends for that matter). She was a little possessive of me – I think if she'd had her way, I would have stayed at home and never married!

Included in the many life-defining events that happened to me while I was at Charlton was my wedding to June in March 1960. June was a police officer. The wedding was big news locally and our pictures were printed in the *London Evening Standard*.

June's father had left her mother when June was only three years old. Upon seeing the news of our wedding he contacted Charlton and asked to speak to me. He introduced himself and asked whether I would mind asking June if she would meet with him. I did, and she wasn't too happy, but we agreed to see him and hear him out. He was very apologetic but I remember him very clearly saying, 'Who am I to give you two advice about married life? But to have a good marriage you both have to give 51 per cent.' That advice stuck with me for the rest of my life.

Alan Brown, the former manager of Sunderland FC, had once given me advice on coaching. He said if I ever had a bad player, by which he meant a player misbehaving or causing trouble, then I should seek to get rid of him as

soon as possible because it was a bad apple that would cause rot to set in elsewhere. It was good advice and I applied it to my personal life too, as well as that piece of advice from June's estranged father. We vowed never to go to sleep on a problem or an argument, if there was an issue, to sort it out with urgency and always be prepared to give 51 per cent. These two simple bits of advice remained with me. Good advice can be timeless when it applies to attitude and behaviour.

I know that anger manifests itself in several different ways but it says a lot to me if someone's immediate reaction to a potentially inflammatory situation is to swear. The first thing it says is that they must have a poor vocabulary! But further, to have such a meek resistance to your own anger that you can only articulate yourself in that manner is a sign of someone who doesn't have control. I much preferred to observe and, to an extent, imitate the behaviour of those who behaved with grace. Walter Winterbottom, the England international team manager and FA director of coaching, had this hushed way of speaking so that you had to be attentive to really listen and hear what was being said. And when he spoke, you could say with a degree of certainty that what he was saying was worth listening to. Every now and then he would raise his voice when it came to making a

point that he really wanted to resonate. A possible teaching from his time at Loughborough University.

It was one of the most enjoyable things I ever did, being able to make life a little easier for my own dad once he retired. I was able to talk openly to my sister about what we went through, although, saying it like that, makes it appear as if it was a great ordeal. We were both aware it really wasn't. I would say it was a standard, typical upbringing, and even though there was an element of the unusual with the attention my career got from my parents, I would still describe the various problems that came with that as those that are usual for any family where one sibling, for whatever reason at whatever time, gets a little more attention. My sister and I got on famously and we both got great satisfaction at providing our parents with comfort in later life. Tragically, though, she was taken from us too soon with ill health at the age of 52. In her periods of illness we became very close indeed and I suppose then, there are some crumbs of comfort to be drawn.