

DAVIE WILSON
AND ALISTAIR AIRD

A close-up portrait of Davie Wilson, a Scottish footballer, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He has short, light brown hair and is wearing a blue football jersey with a white V-neck collar. The background is a blurred stadium setting.

Wilson
ON THE WING

The *Davie Wilson* Story

FOREWORD BY WALTER SMITH OBE

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CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY DAYS

PLEASE ALLOW me to introduce myself. My name is David Wilson and I am 83 years young. I was a professional footballer and I played predominantly as an outside-left for Rangers for 11 seasons. I made over 300 appearances for the club and scored 162 goals, which puts me in the top-ten goalscorers for Rangers since hostilities ended at the conclusion of World War Two. I also played for Dundee United and Dumbarton and represented Scotland on 22 occasions. After I finished playing, I had two spells as manager of Dumbarton – I became the first manager in their history to lead the club in to the Premier Division during my second spell – and also a couple of seasons as manager of Queen of the South.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, let's go back to the beginning and Sunday, 10 January 1937. That's the day my mother and father, Margaret – or Meg as she was better known – and Thomas, welcomed me into the world when I was born at the family home, 20 Clyde Street, in Newton. I was their second child, my big sister Nan being born just over three years earlier in July 1933.

I was a miner's boy and the house we lived in was one of the miners' houses. My father was more commonly referred to as Tommy or Big 'T' and he worked for A. G. Moore & Co at their Blantyre Ferme colliery on the Blantyre Farm Road. He was one of around 400 miners who worked there and he was the principal provider for the family. My mother stayed at home to look after me and Nan and then my two younger sisters, Grace and Linda. Grace was born on 21 January 1941, with Linda a late arrival on 10 November 1954.

Our house had a kitchen, living room, back room and an outside toilet. My siblings and I bathed in the scullery in a bath that was heated using a coal fire. We would use the coal my father got to heat the cold water in the big tin bath, so by the time I was the last one in the water was roasting!

We kept the coal in a coal house and one evening my mother was adamant the neighbours were stealing our coal. To confirm her suspicions, she drew a line in white chalk to mark where the coal was and put two padlocks on the door. Those measures did not deter the coal thieves, though, as the next day more coal had been taken, which left my mother perplexed as to how they were managing to gain entry. But my mother didn't take them to task as she knew those who were taking the coal didn't have much, and that summed up how generous she was.

My father worked for A. G. Moore & Co until 1953. He then moved on to work in the steelworks in Glasgow. As he spent most of his day waist-deep in water when down the pit, he ended up with sciatica. He stayed at the steelworks until it closed down, by which time he was in his late 50s. At that time it was difficult to get employment at that age, and my

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father tried countless places, even walking from Newton to East Kilbride to meet with one potential employer. Eventually someone he had worked with down the pit recommended the Gray, Dunn & Co. biscuit factory in Kinning Park and he remained there until he retired.

Like every boy, my father was my hero and it hit me hard when, in February 1977, he passed away. He used to walk for miles with his greyhounds before he went to work in the morning and would walk to the pit in Blantyre too. He took a stroke, though, and eventually his heart gave up. All the family were at his bedside when he passed.

My mother was a popular figure in the village but was very quiet. She didn't have a bad word to say about anybody and even after I made the grade with Rangers, she stayed humble and was never boastful about the burgeoning talents of her boy. Such was her popularity, the Hallside & Newton church the family attended was packed to the rafters for her funeral service when she died in 1989 at the age of 81.

My early days were good, but I hadn't yet turned three when a chap called Adolf Hitler started throwing his weight around, resulting in the declaration of war on 1 September 1939. But my dad wasn't called to the frontline as he was in what was considered to be a reserved occupation. A list of reserved occupations was published in April 1939 and included dock workers, miners, farmers, scientists, merchant seamen and railway workers. As these occupations were deemed essential to the war effort, my dad was therefore exempt from conscription.

As I was just a wee laddie at the time, I don't remember much about the war, but I do recall the occasions when the Luftwaffe were screaming overhead on a mission to bomb

the Glasgow shipyards. Sometimes when it wasn't so bad the warden would come to the door and tell my mother just to stay in the house rather than go to the air raid shelters as Grace was just a baby at the time. But one night the guns were blazing with the Clyde Valley under attack and we were told to make for the shelters. We made our dash down the street huddled under a board that my big sister, Nan, did her tap dancing on. I remember rationing too but, although we didn't get as much as what we maybe usually got, my mum made sure we were still well fed and I don't recall going hungry at any stage.

When hostilities ended on 2 September 1945 I was at school, having started at Newton Primary School a couple of years earlier. I later moved on to Gateside Secondary and I loved my schooldays.

But I had developed a wee bit of an obsession with football and I was soon shooting to prominence. I always had a ball when I was out and about and me and my pals would play numerous games. My favourite was the one where we tried to keep the ball up for as long as possible, but I have to confess I was a wee bit accident prone, with one incident in particular almost ending my football career before it had even started. That was the day I dropped a drain cover – or stank as we called it – on my toe. I was always skinning my knees and picking up cuts and bruises, but this injury was so bad that my mum thought I would lose my toe. But in the end I got lucky, I only lost the nail, although that wouldn't be the last time my toe would be bandaged up as I was forever losing the nail due to kicking my football around as much as I did.

Our football matches used to take place in the field near our home. It could be challenging at times, though, as it was

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a pasture for cows. And the deposits left by our bovine friends made me extremely ill one day. The kickabout would invariably leave me with a thirst and to quench it in the winter I used to suck on the ice that formed on the puddles in the field. However, on this occasion one of the cows had evidently left a cowpat in the location of the puddle prior to it freezing. I was so thirsty that I didn't notice the ice had been contaminated and for a couple of days afterwards I was fine. But I then started to feel unwell and it got so bad an ambulance had to be called. I had contracted diphtheria and had to spend a few days in hospital as a result.

But even being in hospital couldn't contain my youthful exuberance. In those days family weren't allowed into the ward, they had to stand outside and look in through the window. And on one such visit I left my mother mortified. She looked in through the window and couldn't see me so asked one of the nurses where I was. The nurse pointed to the window ledge and there I was standing and getting myself ready to leap from the ledge on to my bed for what must have been the umpteenth time.

That wasn't the only time in my childhood the Wilson family had a need to call on the emergency services. My sisters and I were always getting up to something and one day Grace, who was only about five years of age at the time, decided to climb up towards the scullery roof. My pals and I had trapped some pigeons in a box, and as Grace climbed up to see I thought I would give her a fright. But when I did she let go of the poles she was using to climb and her head thudded against the concrete path. The impact was such that she was knocked unconscious. Fearing the wrath of my mother, I fled the scene

and I was so scared that it must have been about 10pm that night before I returned home. Fortunately by then Grace had recovered but I thought twice the next time the notion came to give my wee sister a fright.

Those were great days. We were a really tight-knit community and I had lots of pals. We would be out playing morning, noon and night and it wouldn't just be football we'd play either. We had one game which we called 'the street versus the buildings' and the name of the game was to avoid the ash that the other participants threw at you. In a coal mining community where all the houses had coal fires, ash wasn't exactly scarce, and we would gleefully scoop up handfuls of the stuff from the dustbins and launch it at each other. Needless to say, we traipsed home afterwards filthy, but we weren't scolded by our parents, it was all good fun.

Another popular pastime was something we called 'doing the dokies'. This involved following a leader down the street and you had to copy what he or she did. That could be a range of things, including jumping over walls and fences. Grace and I were really close and she was always wanting to run around with my pals and I. But there was a condition; she had to do 'the dokies' before we would let her play with us.

But, close as we were, there were times when my obsession for football took over. One day my mum agreed that I could take Grace to the cinema in Rutherglen. We caught the bus from Newton and Grace was really excited that her big brother was taking her to the movies. But when we arrived I heard my pals were playing football. I was desperate to join them so, noticing a girl in the queue that I knew from Newton, I paid her to take Grace to watch the film and then take her home!

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As you can imagine, once again my mother wasn't best pleased, but the lure of football was just irresistible.

In addition to playing with my pals I was also turning out for the school team on a Saturday morning. We didn't have a school team at Newton Primary so I had to wait until secondary school to get a game. Mr Finlayson was the man in charge of the team, but although we had some good players, I was the only one who made it in the senior game. A lad called John Stark played in the juniors and I thought Jackie Tait, who was a left-back, had a chance of making it too. Jackie was over a year younger than me and he stayed in Dunlop Street, and while I went to Newton Primary he attended Hallside Primary. After he left school he became a steelman with Redpath Brown & Co. Ltd and played football for Burnbank Swifts, with whom he won the Scottish Juvenile Cup in 1958/59.

I have to confess, though, that my appearances for the school team used to drive my mother daft. On numerous occasions I would return home after a game minus the towel my mum had given me, and one time I came back without my navy blue overcoat. Clothes were hard to come by then, so you can imagine my mother's consternation when I returned not just without my own coat but with someone else's, which was much older than the one I had!

I was developing a reputation as a promising player and that led to an impromptu appearance for another school, the local Catholic school, St Charles. They were a player short for one game and they asked my head teacher if I could replace the absent player. He granted permission but that appearance earned my mum an apology from the whole school. She was walking back home one day when she was verbally abused

by some boys from the school. My mum was quite upset by some of the names she was called and told my Aunt Agnes all about it. The children of the family who stayed next door to my aunt went to that school and when their mother heard what had happened she reported it to the headmaster. He had remembered me helping the school out by filling in when they were a player short and he was so angry about what had happened that he ordered the whole school to go down to our house and apologise to my mother.

At the age of 14, I started training at Ibrox two nights a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 6pm to 8pm. The Rangers scout stayed near us in Newton and he had been watching me for a number of weeks in games at Halfway in Cambuslang. I was playing centre-forward and scoring goals, and after scoring ten in one match for the school team at Rutherglen, the deal was sealed. As a Rangers supporter I was delighted, and I hoped one day I could emulate my favourite player, Torry Gillick, and play for the first team.

My headmaster used to let me away from school early so I could get the bus in to Glasgow. I would get off at Carlton Place then walk to the subway, and from there it was out to Ibrox for training. I would train across the road from Ibrox at The Albion, alongside the first-team players that weren't full time, like the late Bobby Brown, who was a PE teacher.

I got the chance to meet the iconic Rangers manager Bill Struth too, although by then he was in failing health and consigned to a wheelchair after he had to have his legs amputated due to gangrene. He stayed in a flat at the stadium and still had a presence at the ground even after he was replaced by Scot Symon as manager in 1954.

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I left school aged 16 – I stayed on so I could get picked for the Lanarkshire schools, but I wasn't too bad academically and I managed to pick up the school dux award before I left – and I ended up working with Redpath Brown. Founded in 1802, they made steel structures and had outlets in Glasgow, London, Edinburgh and Manchester. I started at the works, which were based on Canal Bank Street in Port Dundas, as a template maker. The gaffer there was a Rangers supporter so, just like my headmaster, he would also let me away early for training and games. I stayed with Redpath Brown for six years, leaving when I was 21 and conscripted for National Service.

I was paid the princely sum of £3 per week – which went straight to my mother – but it soon became clear that my career would be starting at Ibrox. There were no youth academies back then, so rather than go in to the reserves or third team, in common with other aspiring footballers of that era in Scotland, I was farmed out to a junior team. Rangers initially called Cambuslang Rangers when I was 14, but their hierarchy turned me down as it was felt I was too young and too small. I was also told that someone thought I wasn't good enough to be a footballer.

The rejection was just a minor bump in the road, though, and I was eventually signed by Baillieston Juniors. And by the end of August 1954, I was in the team, a team that were flying high at the top of the Central League, a 3-1 away win over Kilsyth Rangers, champions the previous season, putting us on 13 points after eight games.

I used to travel through to Baillieston on my push bike. It was roughly five miles from the house in Clyde Street, and I'd do this every matchday as I was still training two nights a

week at Ibrox. I didn't believe in hanging around either. I was pacey on the park and it was the same on the bike. Initially I used my own bike, but eventually I borrowed my cousin Davie Cunningham's bike as it was faster than mine. Once in the saddle I was off like a rocket and it took me a mere 20 minutes to travel through to Baillieston.

My dad, who would work every Saturday morning down the pit, would go to all the games just as he had done when I was playing for the school team. Indeed, when I made the first team at Ibrox and got my six complimentary stand tickets for each game, I would go out and give them to my dad and he would distribute them to friends and family.

I alternated between centre-forward, where I had played for my school team, and outside-right and it was a tough baptism for me in a junior game that doesn't welcome any shrinking violets. But I wasn't overawed and pretty soon I was among the goals, scoring twice in a 3-0 win over Lanark United in the first round of the Lanarkshire Cup on 17 September.

A week later I scored again as we defeated Pollok, my strike after 22 minutes the second of our three goals in a 3-2 win. And at the end of September it was reported in the *Evening Times* that I was Baillieston's 'star forward' and that my 'clever play ought to have brought better results' as we lost 2-0 to Thorniewood in the first round of the West of Scotland Cup.

I was starting to make a name for myself and I had a really good game against Clydebank in the opening round of the Central League Cup on 16 October. Baillieston won 4-1 and I was fouled to win us a penalty for our second goal. And I followed that by bamboozling two defenders before rifling the ball in to the net to make it 3-0 before half-time.

The big prize in Scottish junior football was the Scottish Junior Cup and I made my debut in the competition playing at outside-right as Baillieston comfortably saw off St Anthony's by five goals to one at Station Park in the opening round. I played on the right wing again when we beat Lanark United 4-0 at home in round two, and in November I was selected when Baillieston hosted Wishaw in the third round. I was at outside-left for this one but we trailed 3-1 at half-time. It was soon 4-1 when, shortly after the restart, a chap called Maxwell scored his second goal for Wishaw. But we almost completed a stirring fightback, goals from myself and our left-back, Ross, making the final score 4-3 for our visitors.

I wasn't playing every week but I relished the chance when I was given the opportunity. And towards the end of 1954 I was part of the side that racked up convincing wins over St Anthony's (6-2) and Blantyre Celtic (5-0). A touch of flu kept me out of action over the festive period but I was back in the number-seven shirt for the league clash with Blantyre Victoria at Station Park on 8 January. In his match report for that match, George Manson of the *Evening Times* referred to me as a 'box o' tricks outside-right' and I played my part in our 4-0 win.

The junior game at that time was a rich breeding ground for talent and most of the games up and down the country would attract scouts, not just from Scotland but also from top senior sides in England. As I had already provisionally signed for Rangers, the presence of the scouts had no real impact on me. I was already being talked about as having all the necessary attributes to make a career in senior football, but I was conscious that I had to be playing well when selected as a report card on my progress was most likely being fed back to Ibrox on a regular basis.

The win over Blantyre kept Baillieston in touch with leaders Duntocher Hibs at the top of Division A. We were three points behind the team from West Dunbarton with a game in hand. But we missed a golden opportunity to apply pressure at the start of February. With our rivals on Scottish Cup fifth-round duty, we faced Renfrew away from home in the league but contrived to lose 4-2. We were pretty inconsistent after that and never really looked like winning the league. We won just three of our last ten league games and a 4-2 defeat away at Kirkintilloch Rob Roy on 7 May all but ended our title tilt. Baillieston eventually finished fifth, nine points behind Central League champions Ashfield.

We didn't end the season empty-handed, though. Junior football has numerous cup competitions and during the season I played in a total of six tournaments. I've already spoken about our early exits in the top two tournaments, the Scottish Junior Cup and the West of Scotland Cup, and Baillieston were eliminated early in the Central League Cup too, going out in the second round to Bridgeton Waverley. After a 4-4 draw at home, we contrived to throw away a 3-0 lead in the replay to draw 3-3. The tie was eventually concluded some five months after it started when Bridgeton won 3-1 at the neutral venue of Greenfield Park.

There was more joy in the other competitions, with Baillieston winning both the Eastern Charity Cup and the Pompey Cup. After receiving a first-round 'bye', we exacted revenge on Bridgeton Waverley in the Charity Cup with a 5-1 win. And we went goal crazy in the semi-final, my two first-half goals against Rutherglen Glencairn contributing to a stunning 10-3 win. I scored in the final as well. We trailed 2-0 against

Strathclyde before I got myself on the end of a Jim Tennant free kick to score. Three further goals from Baillieston after the interval secured the trophy.

The Pompey Cup also returned to Station Park. The trophy had been presented to the Central League by Portsmouth back in 1948 to mark the English club's golden jubilee and to recognise the close connection Pompey had with Scottish football. Baillieston had claimed the cup in each of the previous two seasons and we started our defence with a 2-0 win over Kilsyth Rangers in February. A tight 2-1 win over Renfrew followed before we comprehensively beat Shawfield 6-1 in the third round. St Roch's were next on our hit list in the semi-final before we lifted the cup with a 2-1 win over Petershill at Shawfield. The crowd was listed as 4,000 and I was, in the opinion of George Manson in the *Evening Times*, the 'big star' for Baillieston. George reckoned my opening goal in our 2-1 win was 'a real beauty' and it was nice to get such positive press at this early stage of my career.

It was, therefore, a pretty good first season in the junior ranks. I had established myself in the Baillieston team, predominantly at outside-right, although I had moved to centre-forward on the occasions that our regular number nine, Danny Park, had been absent through injury.

After our annual family holiday on the east coast of Scotland I was back at Station Park again for season 1955/56 and was joined in the Baillieston ranks by Jim Tennant, who had also signed provisionally with Rangers. Eventually, I was at outside-right and Jim was deployed on the opposite wing, but we both had to sit out the early matches of the season through injury. I had trouble with my ankle and was unavailable for selection as

Baillieston started off the campaign really poorly, losing heavily to Renfrew (2-5) and Petershill (1-6) in the Central League.

The start to the season was hectic to say the least. The Central League match against Petershill on 3 September was our tenth league match of the season, with the nine played in August taking place inside just 26 days. I was back on the pitch and free from my ankle issue for the match at Petershill Park, but I was unable to arrest our dreadful start to the Central League season, Baillieston winning just three of their opening ten league games. However, when the cup action kicked off we comfortably beat Thorniewood United in the opening round of the Lanarkshire Cup. We won 3-0 and I created our first goal, and Jim won the penalty that put us 2-0 in front.

Another Rangers connection at Station Park was the famous Jock 'Tiger' Shaw. Jock had played 527 games for Rangers, 289 of which were during the Second World War. He had picked up 23 honours and captained the club to the domestic treble in season 1948/49. He also won 24 caps for Scotland. A league championship and Scottish Cup winner at 38, he was still playing in his early 40s and was the oldest player to play for the club until Davie Weir surpassed his record in 2011.

Jock was part of the coaching team at Baillieston and, for a young lad like me, working with someone like him was fantastic. And Jock can take the credit for turning me into a winger. At school I always played as a centre-forward but, as he had been a full-back in his playing days so therefore knew a bit about wingers, Jock told me I had all the attributes to play in that position. He suggested watching the full-back I was up against and looking out for what foot they favoured. He advised that I should then take them on on the opposite

side and I beat many a full-back in my time as a result of that guidance.

A couple of weeks after our win over Thorniewood, I was among the goals when Baillieston beat Vale of Clyde 4-1 in the Central League. I opened the scoring with a close-range finish after 20 minutes to set us on the way to our first league win since mid-August. And I was in the thick of the action again in the opening round of the Central League Cup in mid-November. We faced Vale of Leven at Millburn Park and it was from my cross that our inside-left, a chap called McEwan, opened the scoring. I added a second to give Baillieston a comfortable half-time lead and, although our hosts mounted a comeback in the second half, we progressed to the next round with a 3-2 win.

I was developing a bit of a goalscoring habit and I notched another goal before the end of the month when I opened the scoring in a league match against Shawfield. Although I was playing on the wing, I still had the instinct to get in to goalscoring positions and, on this occasion, I was able to capitalise on some defensive slackness to find the net.

There was a satisfying result for me too the week before Christmas when we hammered Cambuslang Rangers 7-0 in the second round of the Central League Cup. After being rejected by Cambuslang, I always wanted to do well against them and show they had made a mistake by not signing me. And I proved that point emphatically in one match I played against them when I scored the winning goal for Baillieston with, you've guessed it, a header!

That set us up nicely for our Scottish Junior Cup tie at home to Lochee Harp and we continued our scoring streak, with Danny Park notching up a hat-trick in our 5-2 win. In

truth, the cups were really Baillieston's best hope of securing silverware as we just couldn't seem to find a consistent run of form in the Central League. We lost ten of our opening 19 matches to trail the leaders by a mammoth 15 points. We found form after that, winning nine of our last 11 Central League fixtures, but it was too late by then. For the second successive season, Baillieston finished fifth but this time we trailed champions Petershill by 13 points.

For me at this stage it was all about getting experience playing football, and I was certainly getting that as I was in the team virtually every week. And my performances were of such a standard that I earned an outing for Rangers Reserves against St Mirren Reserves on 16 April. The match was played under the floodlights at Ibrox and I was joined in the line-up by another provisional signing, John Bell, who was with Dalkeith Thistle. As you can imagine it was a real thrill to play under the lights at Ibrox, and I played very well in Rangers' 1-0 win, the goal coming courtesy of a Jimmy Walker penalty kick.

Back at Baillieston there was a memorable encounter with St Rochs and I was having a tough time against their red-haired left-back. My Uncle Jim, my mum's brother, was at that game and after one particularly robust challenge that sent me spinning off the park, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He jumped over the wall and landed a punch on the St Rochs player, knocking him clean out. When the referee came over to ask what had happened, my uncle told him that the lad had struck his chin against the railing and that was why he had been knocked out.

Baillieston found themselves knocked out as well when we faced Whitlets Victoria in the fifth round of the Scottish

Junior Cup. We trailed 1-0 at half-time in the first game at Voluntary Park but I equalised a minute after the restart. We fell behind again when the home side scored a second goal just shy of the hour mark. But we forced a replay when we levelled things up at 2-2. Alas, any aspirations of winning the trophy were ended when Whitletts came to Station Park for the replay seven days later. They won comfortably, 3-0, and the silverware coveted by Baillieston was gone for another year.

Our Scottish Junior Cup quest may have been ended but we were going well in the other cup competitions. March saw us progress to the fourth round of the Lanarkshire Challenge Cup at the expense of Douglas Water Thistle – yours truly opening the scoring in that one – and we also edged out high-flying Petershill in the third round of the Central League Cup, winning by the odd goal in nine at Station Park.

Although Baillieston relinquished the Pompey Cup, losing in the first round to Clydebank, we were in the running to win the second of the ‘big’ junior cup competitions, the West of Scotland Cup. We beat Dreghorn 6-1 away from home in the opening round and followed that with another big win, 5-1 on this occasion, against Saltcoats Victoria in round two. I was at centre-forward for that one but missed our next round encounter with Beith through injury. That ended 1-1 but I was back for the replay that saw us secure a narrow 1-0 win.

Newarthill Thistle succumbed 4-1 in the quarter final, which took us through to the last four where we were joined by Irvine Meadow, Parkhead and Clydebank. Baillieston drew Irvine Meadow who sat second in the Western League and we faced the Ayrshire side at Cathkin Park, the home of Third Lanark, on 2 June. I was inside-right on this occasion, but my

fellow forwards and I couldn't conjure up a goal. I went close to opening the scoring with a thumping shot that was deflected for a corner, but a mistake from our goalkeeper allowed Hugh Drennan to give Meadow the lead. They doubled their advantage later in the game and went on to face Clydebank in the final.

There were semi-final defeats for us too in the Central League Cup – we went down to Blantyre Victoria at Celtic Park – and the Lanarkshire Challenge Cup, but Baillieston did pick up silverware in the shape of the Eastern Charity Cup. After a first round 'bye' we beat Shawfield 1-0 in the second round and then needed extra time to edge out Vale of Clyde by the odd goal in seven in the semi-final. Bridgeton Waverley were our opponents in the final and we claimed the cup with a fine 3-1 win at Greenfield Park.

I have to say it was all a bit hectic as the season typically ran to mid-June – as a comparison the final league fixture Rangers played that season was on 28 April – but I thoroughly enjoyed my two years at Baillieston. Although it was primarily about getting game time and showing the powers-that-be at Rangers that I was the real deal, I also developed as a player when I was there.

Mr Symon thought highly of the junior game and was quoted as saying that it was pointless calling players like myself back from the juniors if there wasn't a regular place for me in the Rangers reserve team. For season 1956/57, however, it looked like there would be a place in that team for D. Wilson as I got the call towards the end of April 1956 that I was to report to Ibrox in July for training ahead of the new season.

My journey was about to begin.