

Executive blessed

Former Addicks chief executive PETER VARNEY looks back on his years inside and outside the club

Is it really 20 years since that momentous day when we returned to The Valley?

I sat in the Covered End back then and I can still vividly remember bits of the day – a bus coming down Floyd Road with music playing in the background, meeting up with people we had lost touch with and the sheer elation of everyone when Colin Walsh scored what proved to be the winning goal on a day when victory was assured whatever the result.

My dad passed away in 1982, so he never knew we had left The Valley, but it was a day he would have loved. Memories flood back of some of the great

times spent in the Covered End with him and the friends around us, some of whom I still sit with to this day, but now in the comfort of the lower west stand.

My first-ever match was my sixth birthday present. We played Brighton and Hove Albion and won 3-1. I was hooked.

Going to The Valley on a Saturday was now the highlight of the week and that enthusiasm has never really dulled even now, at 58 years of age. Last season, for example, I saw 44 of the 46 League One Championship winning matches.

As you get older the memory fades, both in relation to players and to matches, although not so much that I couldn't be a member of a victorious Charlton Eggheads team two years ago!

Through the years all of us will remember certain games and players for different reasons. There are matches that stick in

the memory, and often we don't know why.

My problem is that for the early years of my support my dad had a bit of a downer on the club, as we were in the doldrums after the success of the post-war years.

A 3-3 draw against QPR at The Valley is my most clear memory, when Rodney Marsh showed off the full range of his amazing talent. Last year I sat next to him on a flight to Tampa and he remembered every bit of that match, including all the goalscorers.

Season 1968/69 stands out for me, because it was the first time I thought we could achieve promotion to the old First Division. Alan Campbell was the stand-out player in that team but I can still see that wonder goal from Ray Treacy against Brian Clough's high-flying Derby County team even now.

In those days teams played on Good Friday and Easter Saturday, and I remember us thrashing Cardiff City 4-1 on Good Friday and then beating Middlesbrough the next day.

Winning at Palace 2-0 in the FA Cup in front of 40,000 fans was a great night and the train rocked up and down all the way back to London Bridge.

In the next round we fell to the mighty Arsenal, and that was the first time I had been in a 50,000-plus crowd. It was scary and I didn't see much, but it was a great experience nevertheless.

The 1970s were all about Hales, Flanagan, Peacock and Powell, and I remember a night-time 6-1 thrashing of Notts County, in which Mick Flanagan



Bubbling up: Varney celebrates the Championship title win at Blackburn in 2000 as prank victim John Robinson looks on

Battle of the Bridge: Paul Miller secures Charlton's top-flight status at Chelsea in 1988

scored four goals.

There would be more great evening matches. The atmosphere always seemed better than on a Saturday.

God knows when the match was, but I remember Paddy Powell getting the winner in a 4-3 defeat of high-flying Brighton.

It was the decade in which I won an *Evening News* competition for writing a match report on our 4-1 demolition of Spurs, and the prize was a night out with my favourite player. I chose Keith Peacock and it was the start of a friendship that has endured to this day.

The 1980s started out well, with that great day at Carlisle when Mike Bailey's team sealed promotion out of the old Third Division. Funny how we seem to save promotions for Carlisle.

I used to run the Charlton Veterans side with Keith and had the privilege of seeing Mike close up as a player and a manager, but I can tell you that his performances in the veterans were so classy that it made me realise just how good he must have been.

Of course there was the infamous match against Stoke in September 1985, when we all got a leaflet telling us we were leaving The Valley and going to Selhurst Park, of all places.

I went but like others I never got used to it and I always hankered to go back to The Valley. I would drive past the ground from time to time in a detour to check up on it.

I vividly remember the match at Chelsea when we drew 1-1 and put Chelsea in the play-offs to avoid relegation. It was the most intimidating atmosphere I have ever been in at a football match and Paul Miller was a real hero that day.

I couldn't stand as a candidate



for the Valley Party but I did my bit in delivering hundreds of leaflets around Eltham.

Back in 1992 I could never imagine that I would work for the club that has given me so many happy memories, but it happened in 1997.

I already knew Steve Gritt and Alan Curbishley quite well in my role as director of the Brain and Spine Foundation. I had been helping Steve with a fundraising campaign in the name of his late daughter Hayley to raise much needed finance for research into brain tumours.

Alan tipped me off that I was going to get a call from Richard Murray, who at the time was managing director and chairman.

I initially turned down the role of commercial director, but Richard was persistent and before I had even taken up the post Richard stepped down as managing director and passed the baton to me. The confidence he showed in me was something that sustained throughout our relationship and we enjoyed some happy and successful times together.

At the same time I could not have imagined that my youngest son Alex would be a youth

academy player and then a professional for some 14 years. I think my dad would have been looking down at us very proudly.

When you run a football club on a day-to-day basis for 11 years there are so many memories, and not just football matches. In those days the bond with the staff and players was very strong. It is remarkable that years later I still keep in contact with so many players from that era and the banter is as good now as it was at the time.

At times I felt like I was a dad to some of the players, getting them out of various scrapes, and in some cases I still do!

It wouldn't be right to expand on that, but they were great times and those supporters who came on pre-season tours or mid-season breaks will tell you how strong the sense of unity and purpose was.

I seemed to have acquired the role of entertainments manager because of my warped sense of humour, but the banter in those days was fantastic.

If I say so myself I could write a good letter, and Alan Curbishley and I often conspired on a ruse or two, which looking back was great for team morale.



Last stand: the Covered End minus its 1934 roof for the last time on 11 May 2006

I remember John Robinson received one informing him of a £5,000 fine for removing his shirt and revealing a rival kit manufacturer. At one stage his mother and wife got involved and he formally told Alan he would never play for the club again.

The players and management all knew what was going on and played their part to the full.

When John realised it was a practical joke we all ran for cover.

Mind you, the players always got their own back with a vengeance. I remember on one trip I returned to my hotel room after dinner and the room was completely empty. No bed, no wardrobe, no clothes – nothing. My shoes had been super-glued to the ceiling and my toothbrush was all that remained of my toiletries, but it had only one small tip of the brush left.

I called Alan, who came to look. He laughed and went back to his room and off to sleep. It took two hours to track everything down before I could get the room back to normal.

Breakfast the next morning revealed the guilty parties, because they couldn't keep a straight face.

The club staff were so supportive and many worked hours well beyond the call of duty and for salaries well below a comparable level outside, but they did it because they loved the job and the club, and some

still do so today.

The Premier League was a great place to be, both on and off the field, but the journey in getting there was even better. I was fortunate to be at the helm for two promotions from the Championship and eight seasons in the top flight.

There were so many great players and so many great matches that it would do some an injustice to recount only what I remember now.

Imagine winning at Highbury, as we did 4-2 in November 2001. The editor of this magazine produced a DVD called Black Sabbath to mark the occasion.

There were many other DVDs to come out, I am pleased to say, and the only one I regret is Hammer Horror – a 4-0 thrashing of a Curbs-managed West Ham side – because Curbs reminds me about it every time I see him.

The 4-2 Boxing Day defeat of Chelsea in 2003 is another match that stands out. But as for every other Charlton fan, that glorious day on May 25th 1998 at Wembley Stadium, when we secured our first promotion to the Premier League after a 4-4 thriller and 13 penalties, is the greatest Charlton match ever (sorry to fans of the 7-6 Huddersfield match) as far as I am concerned.

The party afterwards was just as good, apart from my eldest

son James being duped by the players into buying them endless supplies of champagne on the club's hotel account.

A few of the players were in my hotel room after the party ended and at 4am in the morning I remember marrying Sasa Ilic and his girlfriend with the hotel room bible, with Mark Kinsella as best man and witness.

Looking back we should never have lost our Premier League status and we should be like a Fulham, West Bromwich Albion or Stoke City in today's Premier League.

Alan leaving was a massive blow, both to the club and to me personally, as we were and are good friends. In hindsight I am sure a lot of things would have been done differently if we all had our time again.

Having a 17-member board and three board meetings a month (executive/plc/football club) was a real pressure, but it was vital to raise the revenue needed to develop the team and most importantly The Valley you see today.

If anyone asks me what I am most proud of during my time as chief executive, it is managing the redevelopment of the ground. As a supporter I always dreamed of The Valley being like other modern stadia.

Although it required a degree of dedication by so many of us to

get the west and north stands completed and financed – there were 300 lunches for example to secure 40 patrons and raise £1m; Steve Sutherland and I put on a stone each in three weeks – it was worth it when I look around now.

The Dowie/Reed/Pardew season was very difficult and the Dowie litigation put a big strain on me personally and continued for two years after I left the club.

Ultimately the litigation was between Simon Jordan and Dowie and was nothing to do with us, but we tried to help and do the decent thing and it all backfired on us. That is a lesson well and truly learned. To my credit I still managed the case for the club despite no longer being an employee.

When I gave notice as chief executive in January 2008 amid a degree of boardroom upheaval, it signalled the end of my day-to-day involvement with the club.

I should have gone at the same time as Alan, which my wife knew I wanted to do at the time, but I didn't and that is something I regret to this day.

A year after I left, the club was in real financial trouble and I accepted Richard's invitation to come back to oversee a £10m bond issue.

That call came again in late 2010 from Richard, who had been left as the sole funder of the club. I thought I had persuaded my good friend David Gold to buy it with David Sullivan.

It wasn't to be, but I know that I played my part in the club avoiding a 10-point deduction, the wholesale exit of players in January 2011 and possible relegation to League Two.

What many people may not have realised is that without a takeover the future of the club was in real doubt, especially with 14 players being out of contract and not being offered anything.

The January 2011 takeover

saved the club and with the investment in players that followed the club is now back in the Championship and just one promotion away from financial security.

I put forward Chris Powell for the job of manager and for the 18 months I was back at the club. I really enjoyed working closely with him, Alex, Damien, Keith, Brett, Phil, Erol, Ben and everyone else at Sparrows Lane and The Valley as much as Alan Curbishley, Mervyn Day, Glyn Snodin and Keith Peacock in those great Premiership days, and I would like to think I helped to make Chris's job a little easier and offered sound advice.

I have no doubt he will have a successful career as a manager. Added to that he is a first-class human being.

I hope also that the work I did with Paul Hart, Steve Avory, Steve Kavanagh and Chris Clark in relation to the youth academy will bear fruit in the coming years. We must get that Category One status sooner rather than later, or the impact on the club will be significant.

In my opinion Alan Curbishley is the greatest manager ever to be in charge of Charlton. In some ways he and Chris are very different, but there is a bit of Curbs in Chris for sure, as you would expect with someone who played under Curbs for so long.

With all due respect to Jimmy Seed, let's hope that when we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the return to The Valley the debate is about who is the greatest-ever Charlton manager, Powell or Curbishley.



Simply the best: Alan Curbishley