

Surely time to honour John?

RICK EVERITT meets John Hewie, our most capped player, and argues he deserves more recognition



Old pals: John Hewie (left), with former teammates Willie Duff and Marvin Hinton, later of Chelsea

Ten or so years ago, when Voice of The Valley was still a fairly recent innovation, I received a poignant letter from South Africa.

Correspondence from abroad was not unusual. What made this item different was that it came from a former player.

And not just any former player, but Charlton's most capped international.

"Long John" Hewie had left The Valley in the summer of 1966 to take over as player-manager at Arcadia Shepherds with 495 League appearances to his name, a number then surpassed by only Sam Bartram.

He would subsequently be overtaken by Keith Peacock in the record books.

But with 17 years as a Charlton player behind him, he had been deeply upset by pictures of the derelict Valley published in Shoot magazine.

He simply wrote asking for information as to what was going on and whether there was any prospect of the team coming home, although at the time he probably already knew as much about that as most of us still living in SE London.

I wrote back to Hewie and explained as best I could, asking him a few questions in return in the hope of writing a short feature on his current situation and thoughts.

He never replied. But when I spotted his lean, angular figure at the players' reunion dinner, it was an opportunity, at last, to tie up a loose end.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Hewie recalled our correspondence.

"I cracked up when I saw the state of the ground," he recalled. "It was very upsetting to see what had happened to it. But now it's bloody great."

"I used to live in a house overlooking The Valley and I remember hitting golf balls on the East Terrace in the summer."

Few players at the dinner were as instantly recognisable as Hewie, even to those of us who never saw him play.

At 70 he is still a tall, authoritative figure, with a strong South African accent.

After quitting the game back home, he returned here to work for ILEA and as player-coach at Bexley United, then went back and sold cars for seven years.

These days, however, he

lives in the Lincolnshire village of Donington, having quit his native land four or five years ago because of worries about violence.

"I've got a wife, a daughter and a granddaughter," he explained. "I've got to look after them and I prefer to do that here, although South Africa is a great country."

"The football scene is thriving and there is a lot of ability, especially among the black players."

It was the great Jimmy Seed who brought Hewie to England for the first time, way back in September 1949, one of a round dozen Springboks to make the Charlton first team.

He came over with Arcadia teammate Norman Nielson, a centre half who by contrast made just one senior appearance before moving on to Derby County.

Hewie's debut came two years later at Fratton Park, Portsmouth, and apart from a five-month interval in 1960, during which he signed for and represented Arcadia Shepherds back home, Hewie was a regular member of the Charlton side for the next 15 years.

In March 1956 he played for a Seed-managed South African XI against Scotland at Ibrox, a game in aid of the British Olympic Appeal watched by 50,000 people. A month later he won the first of his Scottish caps, against England at Hampden Park.

In all the six-foot-two defender would be capped 19 times, the only Addick ever to wear a Scottish shirt in a full international while on the books at The Valley.

He qualified because his father was born at Yarrowfield, near Selkirk, and even participated in the 1958 World Cup finals in Sweden, hitting a post with a vital penalty in the match against France.

As is well known, Hewie appeared in every single position during his Charlton career, including goalkeeper on four occasions.

He was the original Steve Gritt – except that, unlike the later Valley manager, Hewie actually started matches in goal, deputising for Willie Duff

in crucial relegation fixtures during April 1962.

Since the games brought a 3-1 Valley victory over Plymouth and a 2-0 win over Huddersfield at Leeds Road, plus a 2-2 draw at Brighton and another at Bristol Rovers, Duff was probably lucky to get back in the side.

The original all-rounder, Hewie also played hockey, tennis, table tennis and even baseball.

It was surprising, then, when another early correspondent to the Voice jokingly nominated him as the worst player he had seen at the club – in every position.

With disarming modesty, Hewie half agrees.

"I didn't have any skill really," he claimed. "All I could do was run, although I was fast. I had determination and I could use the ball well, but apart from that I had no skill."

His international career and interest from other clubs during his Charlton days suggests otherwise.

"I remember coming back on the train from an international against Wales in Cardiff," said Hewie. "I was having a meal with my wife and we were approached by the Sunderland manager. He asked me how I would fancy a move to Roker Park."

"I told him that I wasn't really interested, as I was quite happy at Charlton. He told me to think about it. It was just as well I didn't, as it turned out, because a month later he was in trouble for making under-the-table payments to players to sign for him!"

Another club who apparently showed an interest were Arsenal.

"I never heard about this until about a month later. But Jimmy Seed had said he didn't want to sell me and I didn't push it, because I was satisfied here."

"The maximum wage was still in place at the time, so there was no financial incentive to move."

Unlike Sailor Brown, who took the opportunity of the dinner to launch another attack on Seed's management, Hewie has nothing but praise for his mentor.

"I thought he was a good

manager," he insisted. "But after that Jimmy Trotter wasn't so good and his successor Frank Hill was no good at all."

It was Hill, also a Scottish international, who in 1962 controversially dispensed with the services of another South African, Stuart Leary, nominated by Hewie as the best player among his many teammates at The Valley, alongside Bartram. Unfortunately, only six of John's Charlton seasons were spent in the top flight, his career coinciding with the club's long fall from grace.

"A lot of the players were getting old at the same time," he said. "Gordon Hurst, Frank Lock, Harold Phipps, Charlie Vaughan, Sam Bartram. And we weren't getting any youngsters in."

"Stuart Leary and Eddie Firmani came eventually, but that was the problem. We didn't get replacements when they were needed. We were always a poor club and known for not spending money in the transfer market."

Now he is back in England full time, Hewie makes a point of seeing the modern Addicks occasionally and he attended the Nottingham Forest Cup-tie a year ago.

"The standard is a lot better than when I used to play," he admitted. "We were a bit crude by comparison. We'd go over the top of the ball and push and barge."

"What the side has going for it now is team spirit, grit and determination, as they showed in the play-off final at Wembley. They kept working for each other and that's what you need."

For all his modesty, these are qualities to which Hewie can clearly relate. Personally, I think that he is due a bit more recognition that he currently receives. Probably he has been deprived of it chiefly by his long exile in South Africa.

Older fans can debate his ability with him, but the fact that John is still our third longest-serving player of all time, our only Scottish international and our most capped player suggests to me that a call-up to the Addicks' Hall of Fame is well overdue.