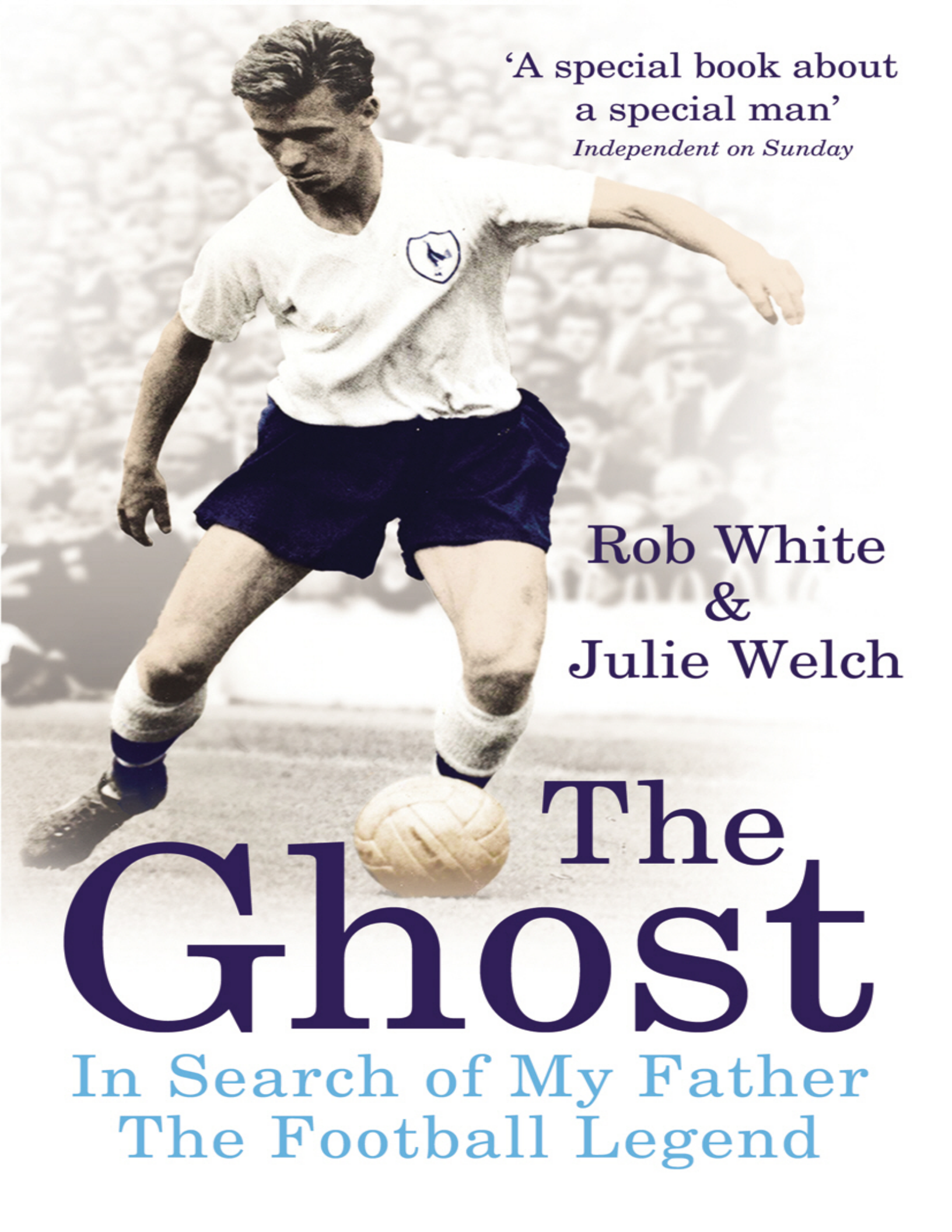

'A special book about a special man'
Independent on Sunday

Rob White
&
Julie Welch

The Ghost

In Search of My Father The Football Legend

Contents

About the Book

When John White was killed by a bolt of lightning in 1964, the football world was rocked by the tragedy. White was just 27 years of age.

Nicknamed ‘The Ghost’ for the way that he could drift into space undetected, White played inside-forward for the great double-winning Tottenham Hotspur side of the early sixties. British football was entering a golden period and Bill Nicholson’s free-flowing Spurs side was right at the forefront. White himself was on the cusp of greatness. Appearing alongside giants of the game like Dave Mackay and Danny Blanchflower, he’d already lifted the European Cup Winners Cup for Spurs (the first European trophy won by any British side) and gained 22 caps for Scotland.

White was the archetypal footballer, but he was also a devoted family man. Six months before he died, his beloved wife Sandra gave birth to their second child, a son called Rob.

Rob White never knew his father. The man who was known by hundreds of thousands of football fans across the country was a complete stranger to him. *The Ghost* is the result of interviews with his father’s teammates, followers, and family members. Within these pages Rob White and Julie Welch have built up a portrait, not only of brilliant and gifted young man but, also, of a lost era.

About the Author

Julie Welch is the critically lauded author of *Those Glory, Glory Days, 26.2: Running the London Marathon* and *Out On Your Feet: The World of Hundred-mile Walking*.

Rob White is a professional photographer. *The Ghost* is his first book.

For Elsie and Martha

ROB WHITE AND JULIE WELCH

THE GHOST

In Search of My Father the Football Legend

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
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1
Ghost Hunt
Rob, 1972

WHAT IF HE appears?

Balanced precariously on a cross-beam, I sit back on my heels. My heart is lurching and I have almost stopped breathing as the familiar feeling of hope and longing gets its elbow round my windpipe.

What if my being here somehow … summons him up?

Why not? This loft is a dark, spooky place – just where you'd expect to find a ghost.

And I wallow for a moment in the fantasy I've always cherished, the one in which my dad simply walks through the door one day and explains that he's never been dead at all. It was a misunderstanding caused by some bizarre misidentification. The press got it wrong. He was nowhere near the golf course that day.

That's mad. I am eight years old, far too old to believe in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy and ghosts. Anyway, if he did appear, how would he get in? He wouldn't walk into a *loft*. Not unless he came through the skylight.

I return to what I was originally doing, grubbing around for a cardboard box. It is, I should add, not just any cardboard box. I suspect, rather than know conclusively, that it exists. I believe that after being entombed for years at the back of my nan's wardrobe it has found its way to the attic of our new house. My conjecture is that it contains the cuttings, medals, caps, documents and letters that are the nearest I'm going to get to my dad.

A cloud of dust floats around everything, smothering the already weak light into a series of dim, ineffectual haloes. Junk is piled randomly on top of other junk. I have no idea where to start looking. It's like trying to find your way around a city in the aftermath of an earthquake.

I could use a bit of help here. A sign from heaven that I'm getting warm. A shaft of light from the dusty pane beamed directly onto what I'm looking for.

Or a flash of lightning. Why not? And there it would be in front of me. The box. That's the one.

I wobble uneasily on the balls of my feet, and something shifts and rustles in the shadows.

I freeze.

What if … something else appears?

Nightmare visions assail me: dark shapes, clammy ectoplasm caressing my cheek, hints of movement behind the trunks, creatures clanking their chains, bastard children of Satan with cloven hooves, lolling tongues and red eyes. Yet I cannot actually bring myself to move, either backwards to the safety and sanity of the loft ladder, or forwards to the unexplored jungle of bric-a-brac.

I must. I have lain in wait for this opportunity for so long. It's the first time my mum and stepdad have gone out as a couple on their own. My big sister is round at a friend's. I'm alone in the house for the first time.

After what seems like hours but is in fact probably a few minutes I realise I have unearthed something promising. Not a box, but a brown leather briefcase embossed with the initials J.A.W.

That would be for John Anderson White. My dad.

The box isn't far away. And when I do find it, it's just … weird. How can something so precious be so ordinary? Why isn't everything lying on a bed of velvet? Instead, inside, it looks like a collection of tat: old newspapers, jumbled-up treasures, a scruffy exercise book, letters in faded ink, cards of condolence. Dad's medals are wrapped in tissue

paper, as if they're everyday ornaments. They're stuffed into a silver tankard inscribed *John White honoured guest of The National Sporting Club at Dinner given to The Tottenham Hotspur Football Club Team, Café Royal, Monday 24th June 1961*. He's got to have supped from that! It's the Holy Grail!

I carry on rummaging. His boots are bundled together any old how, one toecap stuck in the toecap of the other. His boots! Black leather, size 6½. They look like ballet shoes. The laces hang as though he's just slipped out of them. I can't resist. How much closer can you get to a footballer than his boots? I try them on, hold his medals to my chest. I put the Scotland cap – blue velvet, gold braid – on my head, trying to feel what it's like to be him.

Think! It's got to be in me somewhere. A trace memory, surely, deep in my unconsciousness. Scoring for Scotland against West Germany at Hampden Park in the first minute of your first international! Being inside Wembley dressing room after winning the Double! Think yourself into being your dad!

It's no good. I remain unchangingly myself.

Never mind. I've got these newspapers to read. Carefully I smooth open the ancient, pinkish-yellow front page of the *Scottish Daily Express* for Wednesday 22 July 1964.

> GOLF COURSE TRAGEDY
> Scots soccer ace is struck by lightning
> John White, brilliant young Spurs and Scotland star, was killed by lightning yesterday as he sheltered under an oak tree at Crews Hill Golf Course, Enfield, Middlesex.

I try to turn over the fragile pages. It doesn't help that my hands are shaking. It isn't fear now but an accumulation of all the wanting and anger and frustration

that has built up in me over the years. Having a dad who everybody seems to know about except me. Knowing I'll get a pitying look every time I'm introduced as John White's son. Being a small boy in school assembly, starting with the Lord's Prayer. Every day when I hear those words, 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' I'll think, 'There you go again.' Seething to myself as the same question darts through my mind: How busy is God that He can't decide not to send a bolt of lightning down to someone who is basically a good person?

Part of me wants to look away. This is my dad they've killed off there. But that's the worst bit finished with. I can do this. And now another, much more insistent, part of me starts ravenously scanning.

'… Motherwell offered him £2 a week as a ground staff boy. But as he was earning twice as much as an apprentice and his widowed mother needed the money, he turned it down …', says the obituary in the *Scottish Daily Express*. And here's Bill Brown: 'He was a terrific bloke'; Denis Law: 'I loved playing with him'; Jim Baxter: 'He was the one person in the game who was friends with everybody.' 'The greatest days were still to come for John White' – that's the opinion of no less than the great Danny Blanchflower. And though I've no memory of my dad – I was five months old when he was killed – this testament to his greatness and this evidence of his niceness just breaks me up.

So now I'm crying; at least, I can feel tears running down my face but the odd thing is that it can't be classified as grief. This is not sorrow. I have no idea why but I actually feel comforted.

He did exist. He was a brilliant player. That much comes home to me as I scan old match reports: 'the white-shirted magician, Scotland's John White …'; 'that great artist, John White …'; 'John White, mastermind of the Spurs attack …'

He was also a joker: 'I will remember him,' wrote his Scotland teammate Jim Baxter, 'in a false moustache giving

a Charlie Chaplin impression … He was so full of life, so determined to make it fun for others.' One journalist talked about going to a function and seeing 'John White and his great team buddy, Cliff Jones, doing a very commendable can-can'. 'It's a terrible loss. He will be missed by the players more than they would miss anyone else.' Bill Nicholson said that, so it must be true.

And as I look at the front-page headlines of the national newspapers in front of me, massive proclamations in bold type that demonstrate the shock of his death, I feel a twinge of embarrassment. What kind of chippy little git am I, whining about people giving me pitying looks when there's kids out there who also lost a parent that day, through a heart attack maybe, or through being run down by a car, who have nothing like this to remember their loved one by?

I return to the papers. I think I'll look at more cheerful things now, from his earlier days at Tottenham. A full-page cartoon catches my eye.

It's the *Daily Express* FA Cup Special. May 1962. Burnley v Spurs. The drawing depicts my dad as a skeleton, complete with rattling chains. The caption reads:

> JOHN WHITE
> THE PALE GHOST OF WHITE HART LANE
> The frail phantom steps out on to Wembley's lush battlefield. 20 million will see him flit across the TV screen. 100,000 more will see him with their own eyes.

Now I am bewildered, completely. The ghost. That's just bizarre. They called him that while he was still alive.

I put the newspaper under my jersey and hold it there as I climb back down to the landing. If I calm down and read it carefully, perhaps I'll be able to fathom out the whole

nickname thing. The Pale Ghost of White Hart Lane. Why did they call him that?

WHITE HOLDS KEY TO SPURS CHANCES AGAINST THE CZECHS

European Cup Winners' Cup, Tottenham Hotspur v Slovan Bratislava

Without Blanchflower (knee injury), Mel Hopkins, a reserve for most of the last three years, at right-back instead of Peter Baker, and with Frank Saul on the right wing instead of Terry Medwin, much will depend on whether John White, the man who has often turned their attack into a devastating goal-scoring machine, is back to form.

Donald Saunders, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1963

2
John White – A Beginner's Guide

HE'S NO GHOST now. This has got to be the best he's ever played.

The date is 15 March 1963. It's a warm spring night in north London and the floodlight pylons are glowing platinum in the gradually darkening twilight.

The match is the quarter-final, second leg of the European Cup Winners' Cup. Spurs are playing Slovan Bratislava of Czechoslovakia. Two weeks back Spurs lost 2–0 in Bratislava in the cold and snow. It could have been 4–0, could have been 10–0, except Bill Brown guarded his goal like it was the Pentagon. The moment they get back to London Bill Nicholson calls them all in for early training and castigates them.

This time it's different. There's nothing about them tonight that Bill, the great perfectionist, could moan about. Stamping their feet on the wooden floor of the stand, the 60,000 crowd sound as though they're capable of wiping out the Czechs' two-goal advantage all by themselves. Spurs are about to make history in Europe. Six weeks from now they will become the first British side ever to win a European trophy.

Like Spurs, Slovan are a money side, with a £500,000 squad of twenty stars in the days when half a million pounds isn't the kind of loose change you might find down the back of Wayne Rooney's sofa. A conglomerate of massive East Europeans, they're led by their gargantuan centre-half Jan Popluhar and it will take some team to make them bow to the roar of the crowd. But some team is what

they’re up against. This is the greatest Spurs side since the war. Forget push and run. They’re even better than the boys of summer ’61, the ones who won the Double.

Spurs, with their beautifully poised control, are sweetly into their game. Bobby Smith, a heavy-lidded, broad-backed Yorkshireman, a centre-forward in the classic bashing mould, is doing his best right now to do in Slovan’s World Cup keeper, Wilhelm Shroiff. As he left the pitch after the first leg, he pointed a threatening finger at him. ‘Londres!’ he growled. And now Bobby makes Shroiff lose his nerve from the first moment, when he thumps into him, shattering the beam from the floodlights into fragments.

Jimmy Greaves and Cliff Jones are smashing in shots: Jimmy, scorer of the world’s most idiotically opportunist goals, a man who never had to be taught how but who emerged fully formed the moment he put on his first pair of boots; Cliff, the best winger you’ll ever see, only five foot seven, incredibly quick and preposterously brave in the air as he goes crashing in over the heads of five people to get to the ball; the movement seems counter-gravitational, the way a salmon goes up a waterfall.

Yet it’s none of these three who start what’s coming to Slovan. Dave Mackay has been barrelling back and forth along the left flank for half an hour. Long-bodied, short-legged, Dave is a magnificent being strangely reminiscent of a centaur. There’s something about him that leaves the impression of restrained violence which might break out at any moment. He isn’t a crude player; he’s just very strong, the sort who’ll come storming through the mud and fog when Spurs are losing to earn them a point. Commitment alone isn’t enough to make him a great player, though; he also has fantastic technique. This is him now, jumping onto a cross that’s been headed down by a Czech defender. Dave rams home a big, big shot from twenty yards.

One–nil.

The cross has come from John White. He's slim and pallid, his thighs look pathetically unmuscled, but pinning him down is like trying to nail mercury to the floorboards. That, anyway, is how it must seem to Slovan. With John pulling Slovan apart, here one minute, there the next, it's time for Jimmy Greaves to score one of his precious, individual goals, collecting John's pass in midfield and evading two defenders on the run before beating the keeper.

Two–nil on the night, 2–2 on aggregate. The stands are vibrating. And here's John again, initiating the move that ends in Bobby Smith heading Spurs' third goal in nine minutes. Slovan's Schroiff is in bits, Spurs have cancelled out every bad memory of the first leg and then some, and there's fifty minutes of play still to go.

After the break, more. Spurs are immeasurably on top, controlling the game with quick-passing movements which smother the last whimpers of retaliation from Slovan's suffering defenders. The absence tonight of the ageing, injured Danny Blanchflower, the great playmaker, hasn't proved to be the blow to Spurs' hopes people thought. With the opportunity now not to respond to Danny's prompting but to be the prompter, John has stepped up to the plate.

Sixty-five minutes, Greaves, a chip. Seventy-five minutes, Jones, a header. Once again, John instigates the assaults, a presence of astounding energy who appears from nowhere, through gaps of sheer unfeasibility, to split apart a defensive wall.

How does he do it? How does he find those spaces? How does he know where to go? 'If you're playing against Whitey, you'll think: "He's ten yards away. Over there. I'll watch him,"' says Brian James, one of the best sportswriters of his generation. 'You look again. He's not there. Look at how the greatest boxers operate; they watch the eyes and wait for them to twitch. In a similar way, John is waiting for your inattention. He sees you keeping your

eye on the ball, keeping tabs on what the full-back's doing, keeping an eye on the centre-half. John White sees that and, whoosh, he's gone.'

'John can see things before anyone else,' says his team-mate Terry Medwin. 'He'll be involved *knowing* it's going to happen. He does everything right. I doubt if he'd give a ball away in three matches. Easy. Simple. If the ball's been passed somewhere, within twenty seconds he'll have gone somewhere where he can get it. It's knowledge. You've either got it or you haven't. Johnny Haynes has knowledge. So has Bobby Moore. And Cliff Jones – on your bike, he's gone. But with Cliffie, he's operating in the same place every time. John – he can go anywhere. And he'll have gone there for a reason.'

'Such a lovely little bloke,' offers Mel Hopkins, the defender, fondly. 'Great little footballer. One place one minute, another place the next.'

'John is hard to pin down,' adds the renowned football writer David Lacey. 'If you're the opposition, he can vanish before your eyes.'

Just like a ghost.

Above all, John is relentlessly energetic. Dave Mackay will tell you that very often he and John will return to training after lunch, when the other lads have gone off home, and practise further. Even when Dave leaves, John will stay and continue running, running and running.

He's been like that since boyhood. Ask Tom White, John's younger brother. He'll tell you about the day they couldn't stop him playing keepy-uppy.

'We're in the garden and he's been away for half an hour with the ball still on his foot and we couldn't get him to stop. He'd put it on one foot and do a hundred and then he'd flick it on the other foot and do another and then he'd start again, kicking it higher and higher, with this smirk on his face. I mean, we were waiting to have a go, so Edwin, our brother, had had enough of this and he went in and he

got a bucket of water and went to the upstairs window and poured it over him. And John still tried to keep it going. It was just incredible.'

A lot of qualities can be read into that story. There's the focus, the sense that life is a joyous comedy to be enacted as intensely as possible, the revelling in his superiority. 'He was,' says Tom, 'a little bastard sometimes.' There's the talent that stands out in a family where all the brothers can run like racehorses and land twenty-yard passes on tin cans: Eddie, growing up to play for Falkirk; Tom, centre-forward at Hearts. That would be enough for any family to boast about, but then there is John. 'White is perhaps more characteristic of [Bill] Nicholson's concept of the game than any other player in the Tottenham side,' Julian Holland is to write of him later in *Spurs – The Double*. 'He is the key to the Championship-winning side.'

John White just loves football. 'Any ball we had in the house,' says Tom, 'he would keep it up. He kept a tennis ball in his pocket to practise with, it's something he's done all through his life. I've heard people say they bumped into him in Edinburgh, with that tennis ball at his feet.' 'I don't think he set out with any ambition to be a professional footballer,' says Sandra, his wife. 'He just plays because he loves it and he wants to be the best at what he's doing.'

A lot has happened to John since 1959, the year he left Scotland for London, when one reporter described him as 'wispy, with a council house haircut'. He's such a subtle player, the crowd didn't get him at first. There's so much happening on a pitch and people like him are not obvious. The fans took a while to realise. They thought he wasn't pulling his weight.

He was born into a working-class Scottish family and scarred by the loss of his father at an early age. He's Spurs royalty now, with a League championship medal, two FA Cup medals and, as part of a golden generation of Scottish

players, a bunch of international caps; with John in the side, who's to say Scotland can't lift the 1966 World Cup?

Yet John is still recognisable as the puny Musselburgh boy who cuts the feet off his socks to get a better feel of the ball. Narrow-faced, slim-shouldered, in those butchered socks he stands 5 ft 7½ in and still weighs barely ten stone, most of which seems to be made up of his thick, blond mop of hair. And all match reports tend to talk of him as 'the fragile genius', 'the frail wizard', 'the pale phantom'.

Described like this, he sounds like the Before photo in one of those old Charles Atlas bodybuilding adverts. And indeed, even if after four years at Tottenham, he's thickened out a bit and grown in confidence, calling him the Ghost remains about right. It's something to do with the way he just drifts around defenders, then pops up behind them. Boo! And then: Goal!

No one, it follows, could accuse John White of being a run-of-the-mill midfielder. He plays football the way no one else plays football. When he makes a pass, the chances are you can't see the value of it till he's done it, and then you'll just gasp at the insight and the skill. As a spectator, you can no more anticipate what he's going to do than an opponent can.

Yet when you consider the demands that the game in the early sixties makes on energy, stamina, speed and strength, together with the constant risk of catastrophic leg breaks from hard tackling and quagmire pitches, it's astonishing that he's remained without injury.

The reason is simple; you can't man-mark him. Even if you are a world-class international, there isn't the slightest possibility of getting near him. That being the case, he never gets injured. Here's Peter Baker, on a torrid day for Manchester United against Spurs at Old Trafford. 'Nobby Stiles staggered over and slumped next to me. I said to him, "I thought you were meant to be marking Johnny

White.” “I’m fucked,” Nobby said, “I can’t move. He’s run my bloody legs off.”’

If you still need convincing, in the handful of games John has missed in his four seasons with Spurs so far, Spurs have won only once. When he loses form – and he does so quite predictably roughly midway through the season, for about six games, when the pitches are like sludge – the whole side falters, apart from Dave Mackay, who by now is conditioned to provide the belly-fire to usher them through the slump. But Mackay, for all his skill and commitment, is no creative director, and Bill Nicholson has in the past kept John in the side, knowing he’ll snap out of it sooner or later. This season it has been different – a terrible winter in which John has suffered not just the usual agues but a bereavement so psychologically painful he ended up hospitalised. Earlier this month, for the first time in his career at Spurs, John was briefly dropped.

But now in the press box they’re having to think up new adjectives. Unrivalled. Matchless. Magical. Incomparable. You only have to look at the last name on the score sheet: *Tottenham 6, Slovan 0 (White, 76 minutes*). As a coda to his fabulous evening, John bows out with a goal of his own.

The crowd swarm onto the mud-slicked pitch, hugging their heroes. Newspaper headlines the next morning hail a ‘SIX-GOAL “MURDER”’. Weeks later, the final in Rotterdam confirms Tottenham’s utter dominance as they beat Atletico Madrid 5–1.

But this night at White Hart Lane is the night everyone knows. It doesn’t matter that Blanchflower’s career is coming to an end, that Bobby Smith has peaked, that you never can tell what condition Mackay’s going to be in. Here’s what Bill Nicholson is looking for, the answer to: what happens after Danny? This is the night that tells you John White is the future of Spurs.

JOHN WHITE ALL-STAR GAME IS BACKED

Top Scottish football stars last night whole-heartedly supported a *Daily Record* proposal for an all-star testimonial game in memory of John White, who was killed by lightning on a golf course.

In London Tottenham Hotspur's manager Mr Bill Nicholson said after a board meeting: 'A John White fund is being opened, and we are contributing £1000.'

Daily Record, 23 July 1964

3
Remember the Double-winning Team?
Rob, 2010

A COMPLETE ACCOUNT of my search for my father would probably take a lifetime to tell because that's how long I've been looking. The need to find out about him dominated my childhood almost from the time I could think. That was when I was old enough to notice that other children lived with their mum and dad while I lived with Mum, my sister Mandy, my grandmother Alma (she was the widow of Bill Nicholson's right-hand man, Harry Evans) and my uncle Andrew, my mother's kid brother who, bizarrely, was only three years older than me.

The trouble was that nobody at home ever talked about Dad. This made his absence seem like some dark family secret, especially as there was no visual evidence to give me a clue – no wedding photo on the mantelpiece, no family album, not even an envelope of old holiday snaps. They must have been such hard times for Mum, those first years – widowed at twenty-two, my sister and me a constant reminder of what she'd had. I didn't like to upset her by asking about him. What if she burst into tears?

There were other, secondary, weirdnesses as well. For example, when I played with other children, their parents had obviously instructed them not to ask, 'Where's your dad?' On the other hand, when I got taken to football and was ushered into the boardroom, people wouldn't talk about anything else.

'This is John White's son.'

‘Ah.’ A sorrowful look would be bestowed on me. ‘What a great player, though.’

Then my head would be patted and I would feel uncomfortable and increasingly chippy. I was proud of my dad but who doesn’t want to be liked for themselves?

So, instead, I tried to cobble together some sort of narrative out of what was available. Peter Baker, the right-back in the Double-winning side, was tall, bronzed and debonair, like the actor who played Tarzan – not Johnny Weissmuller, the original, but the one in the TV series, Ron Ely. He was married to Linda, who had been friends with Mum ever since they were the two youngest of the Spurs wives, and the Bakers and their kids used to come round to us on summer afternoons, when there were kickabouts in the back garden.

Peter was like a fun uncle, a good-looking, sporty guy whose appearance was everything a footballer’s should be. For me, though, the main attraction was his aftershave. One day I realised it was the same as the one that lingered on my dad’s travelling razor, which had been passed down to me along with a little shaving brush and came in a zipped leather top. So I knew what Dad smelt of – the clean-cut, manly smell of Old Spice. When you have nothing, you’ll grasp at anything. Even a whiff of aftershave helps.

Then there was Cliff Jones, the winger in the Double side who everyone said was better than a legendary Real Madrid player called Francisco Gento; I suppose the equivalent these days would be someone like Franck Ribéry. Cliff had packed up playing and was working as a PE teacher at Highbury Grove School, on the other side of Highbury Fields, and he almost looked like a cartoon drawing of a very fit guy – short, with a slightly military bearing, always smart, in a blazer or seventies beige suit with fawn-coloured shirt and brown tie, as if he’d just stepped out of *A Question of Sport*. The day before

Christmas Eve every year, Cliff came round laden with presents. It was like seeing Santa in a department store, an indication that Christmas was coming. But it wasn't the presents, it was the fact that Cliff Jones was there, full of joy and spirit and warmth. He'd been Dad's best mate. Cliff was good fun. To me, that was evidence. Dad had been good fun too.

Another set of clues was to be found in Musselburgh, the fishing village six miles outside Edinburgh where Dad grew up. Every summer Mandy and I would stay with Granny White in her two-roomed tenement, which had incredible views of Edinburgh on one side and the Firth of Forth to the other. Musselburgh in the late sixties and early seventies seemed pretty much unchanged from the fifties. The ice-cream parlour frequented by my dad and his brothers was still there, as was the ash pitch at the bottom of Links Street he'd played on. So was the bridge he crossed every day when he ran – always ran – to work. I slept on a camp bed in the front room with Granny White, the cooker, the kitchen table and the glass cabinet with the little Delftware football boots that Dad had brought back from a European trip. It made a nice bond between us that felt really natural.

With her housecoat seemingly permanently fused to her body and her slightly Queen-like hairdo, I suppose you'd call Granny White a matriarch. She'd brought up three sons and a daughter on a widow's pension, and her personality was immense and renowned; all the other women in the neighbourhood would go to her if they wanted cheering up. I was a wiry, fine-boned kid with a blond mop of hair, and my apparent resemblance to my father at the same age must have stirred up painful emotions, but she was a get-on-with-it, have-a-laugh kind of person.

I got to know Dad's siblings. Janette was shy but determined, with a stubborn streak and pawky sense of humour that I suspect Dad shared; years later Mum told me

of the time he'd returned from an international with the information that 'Denis [Law] is more mature now. If he's offered you a cup of tea he doesn't keep pouring when you take the cup away.'

My uncle Eddie, the oldest of the White boys, was grumpy and funny. He'd been on Falkirk's books before giving up football in favour of the building trade and betting. Uncle Tom, born two years after Dad, was a considerable player in his own right; his clubs included Aberdeen, Hearts and Crystal Palace. The most academic of the boys, he ended up as a director of Blackpool. From photos of the brothers, I could see enough of a resemblance to show what Dad might have looked like in middle age. Baldness is the curse of the Whites.

As I got older there was, of course, one brilliant perk that came from having a famous footballer for a dad, and one who died in eye-poppingly daft circumstances. It provided some of the greatest chatting-up opportunities a teenage boy could wish for. If you can appeal to a girl's sympathies by saying you were deprived of a father growing up because he got struck by lightning, why not? As an essentially shy person, I was willing to take every advantage I could get.

There have been moments of gallows humour, too. In Scotland once when I went to Gullane for an early round of golf on my own, the elderly female receptionist asked for my mobile phone number. As this seemed rather strange, I asked why. 'It's just in case there's some sort of emergency, like, say, you were struck by lightning,' she explained.

Another time, as a big Mike Leigh fan, I went to see *Life Is Sweet*. Set in Ponders End, close to where I grew up, it all seemed very familiar because of these visual references of places and larger-than-life versions of the types of characters I knew. At one stage of the film, one maudlin Spurs fan in a Victorian pub says to another, 'Remember

the Double-winning team?' and even before they reeled off the names I thought, Oh shit. They're going to say –'

'… John White.'

'Yeah.'

'What a player. Struck by lightning.'

'Cut down in his prime.'

At which point quite a few people in the audience laughed. My knee-jerk reaction was fury. What the hell, I fumed, is funny about that? That's my dad you're tittering about. Then, on the brink of jumping up, I thought about Dad. What would he have done? By then, I'd read enough about him to know that his deep seam of comic lunacy would have prevailed and far from being enraged he would have appreciated the surreal humour.

It's Tom who has, over the years, worked hard to keep the image of my dad burning bright for my sake. I remain touched by the way even now he and Eddie run upstairs to bring down some photo I've already seen a hundred times. In the process I have learnt many essential milestones of Dad's life, and heard a good many anecdotes that help fill in the picture. But most of these are of the don't-speak-ill-of-the dead variety and tell me little more than I already know. For Eddie, Tom and Janette, the wound of his death, with its merciless unexpectedness, is in some ways as raw and painful as the summer day in 1964 when it was inflicted. The best way for them to deal with it, still, is not to go there.

What I have longed to know, and have never been able to find out, are the real, human, almost primal things about my dad. What did he sound like? Did he have a deep voice? A happy voice? Was he quiet or loud? How did he move? What was he like to touch? What went on in his mind? Who was the man behind the well-polished image of John White, the guy who was always mischievous, popular and helpful, everybody's friend?

This drive to know what he was like, flaws and all, has intensified as the years have gone past and I've become a father. It was brought home to me again around five years ago when I found myself accompanying Peter Baker to a home game against Chelsea.

Normally I would have been in the cheap seats; I've been a season ticket holder in the Park Lane lower end for ten years. That day, I wanted to take Elsie and Martha, my daughters. The plan was to give them their first introduction to football, and Spurs, but three together for Chelsea was harder and more expensive than ringside seats at the Second Coming.

It panned out better than I expected. Peter, who automatically gets a ticket as a genuine, copper-bottomed Spurs Legend, needs someone to go with these days. He's all right with familiar surroundings and people – he's really good with my girls, and plays golf with Bert, my stepdad – but he forgets things. So in exchange for my being Peter's minder, which was a genuine pleasure, he pulled three free tickets out of the hat.

The bad news, as far as I was concerned, was another part of the exchange: I was to go onto the pitch at half-time with the girls and collect a decanter engraved with my dad's name, commemorating the induction of the members of the Double side into the Spurs Hall of Fame.

The atmosphere was fantastic, partly because Spurs had equalised just before half-time. When the moment came for us to go on the pitch, I told myself it was no big deal. It was just a patch of grass which I had to stand on for a few minutes. How scary could that be?

Very, very scary for someone who hates the spotlight. I was on a pitch under the floodlights in the middle of a big game in front of 36,000 people, under a giant image of my dad. I gave a little wave and looked for my mates. The Park Lane lower end seemed *miles* from the halfway line.

What I hadn’t bargained for was that everyone in the ground started cheering.

There were going to be no tears. I was determined not to become emotional. But I was so proud.

My dad played at a time when footballers lived in houses provided by the club. During the 1963–64 season he earned £100 a week. He owned two cars throughout his life. Compared to today’s footballers, he might as well have been playing on another planet.

Yet I very much doubt that in forty years’ time the vast majority of today’s footballers will be remembered with so much affection that 36,000 people stand up and cheer them. Or that they’ll be spoken of with such warmth and tenderness by their team-mates.

My father died in such a freak event that people know about him even if they’re not that into football. Even if they are, the standard response to his name is ‘Oh yeah. Killed by lightning’, rather than ‘Oh yeah, played for Spurs from ’59 to ’64, with Blanchflower and Mackay part of the best midfield of the twentieth century, essential component in the team which won the Double, part of the golden generation of Scotland players …’

Ultimately, I feel that skews things slightly, which is a pity. Because what my dad achieved reveals plenty – not just about his magical genius and his sheer joy in life, but about his modesty, generosity, sense of duty, team spirit and dedication: values which, like him, seem irrevocably lost to football.

That is what has spurred me to look into his life, and tell his story now. Above all, I want people to understand his place in the folklore of Tottenham and Scotland and our family.

I want Martha and Elsie to be as proud of him as I am.

‘I can still remember my first pair of boots. One of my aunts saw me having a kickabout with some other lads, and noticed I was the one youngster without football boots. She asked me how much a pair would cost. I told her thirty shillings. So she gave me the money as a birthday present. I rushed to the local store, and ran all the way home still wearing my new boots.’

John Graydon meets cover man John White,
World Sports, April 1962