

Big Mal

The High Life and Hard Times of Malcolm Allison, Football Legend

David Tossell



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



BIG MAL

The High Life and Hard Times of Malcolm
Allison, Football Legend

David Tossell



MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

This ebook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licenced or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Epub ISBN: 9781780574653

Version 1.0

www.mainstreampublishing.com

This edition, 2009

Copyright © David Tossell, 2008

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by

MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY

(EDINBURGH) LTD

7 Albany Street

Edinburgh EH1 3UG

ISBN 9781845964788

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any other means without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for insertion in a magazine, newspaper or broadcast

The author has made every effort to clear all copyright permissions, but where this has not been possible and amendments are required, the publisher will be pleased to make any necessary arrangements at the earliest opportunity

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

1 Man and Boy

2 Tactics in the Teacups

3 Hammer Horror

4 Running Wild

5 Part-time Love

6 Pilgrim's Progress

7 Whines and Women

8 Made in Manchester

9 Anatomy of a Championship

10 Paradise City

11 Cup Kings

12 The Birth of Big Mal

13 The End of the Affair

14 Sinking Feeling

15 Out of the Blues

16 Crying Game

17 Cat in the Hat Meets the Bird in the Bath

18 You Can't Go Back

19 North-East Frontier

20 Rovers Return

21 No More Games

Bibliography

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people's memories and opinions have helped to shape this story, so I am greatly indebted to all those with whom I have discussed Malcolm Allison during my research: Mark Allison, Colin Bell, John Bond, Tony Book, Alistair Brownlee, John Cartwright, Terry Cochrane, Joe Corrigan, Paul Crockford, Steve Daley, Derek Dougan, Don Howe, Gordon Jago, Stewart Jump, James Lawton, Francis Lee, Stuart Lee, Eddie Lewis, Graham Little, Terry McDonald, Bob McNab, Peter McParland, Gary Megson, Ian Mellor, John Newman, Bob Nichols, Ian Niven, Frank O'Farrell, Jeff Powell, Norman Piper, John Radford, Nicky Reid, Don Rogers, Lynn Salten, Dave Sexton, Nigel Sims, Roger Spry, Mike Summerbee, Peter Taylor, Andy Tillson, Mike Trebilcock, Derek Ufton, Ron Walker and Alan Whittle.

I am particularly grateful for the support and assistance that was forthcoming from James Lawton and from Malcolm's long-time partner, Lynn.

Tony McDonald, publisher of the retro West Ham magazine *Ex*, allowed me to make use of interviews appearing in his publication. If only every club could boast such an admirable journal. Richard Whitehead was his usual source of contacts and sound advice, while Phil Tanner went beyond the call of duty to provide information about Malcolm's time at Bath City and Ian Whittell opened up many important doors in the Manchester area. Others who have assisted me in many and varied ways are: Phil Alexander, Derek Armstrong, Mike Blackstone, Mal Butler, Tony Ellis, Colin Ewenson, Peter Hall, Steve Harris, Shaun Keogh, John Ley, John Little, Paul Mace, Barry Mead, Ken Nicholl, Jim Platt, Neil Rioch, Haydn Parry,

John Richards, Derek Robinson, Jonathan Sides, Brian Spurrell, Alan Stewart, Fred Street and Dave Thomas.

Thanks to Bill Campbell, Iain MacGregor, Graeme Blaikie and all the staff at Mainstream for their professionalism and support and to Andy Cowie at Colorsport and the staff at Getty Images and Rex Features for their assistance in sourcing photography for this book. I am grateful, as always, to all those writers and authors whose material has formed an important part of my research. I have endeavoured to acknowledge them in the bibliography.

Final thanks once more to my family, especially Sara, Amy, Sarah and Laura, for all their love and encouragement.

A percentage of royalties from this book has been donated to the Alzheimer's Society (Registered Charity: 296645), which continues to research into all forms of dementia, offering care to sufferers and their families. Further information can be found online at www.alzheimers.org.uk.

MAN AND BOY

'What would big Malcolm Allison do in a situation like this, eh?'

'Smack [him] over the head with a bottle of champagne and stub his Cuban out on his hand'

*- Manchester CID members discuss
how to deal with
a 1970s criminal (Life On Mars, BBC 1,
February 2007)*

It was still only late August, the opening weeks of the 2006-07 season, but the familiar pattern had been re-established already. Even on their own ground, little consideration had been given to the likelihood of Manchester City achieving victory against a multinational, multi-talented Arsenal team whose ambitions of winning another Premiership title contrasted starkly to the home club's more modest aspirations for the coming campaign. A penalty scored by City's Joey Barton appeared merely to be delaying the inevitable. For most fans in the City of Manchester Stadium, games between these sides had usually conformed to this recognisable blueprint.

Spotting a recognisable face in the crowd, the Sky Sports cameras homed in. Here was a man whose influence almost 40 years earlier had made things very different. A man whose vision, planning, motivational powers and, often,

sheer force of personality had made Manchester City the team against whom the likes of Arsenal measured themselves. The graphics operators hurriedly got to work. Up went the caption, 'Malcolm Allison, former Manchester City coach'. Commentators were sufficiently distracted from the latest piece of Thierry Henry trickery to purr at the memory of Allison's achievements at the club: four major triumphs in a three-year span, including a complete set of domestic trophies and a European success.

Young viewers knowing only of life in the glossily packaged days of endless live televised football - even those who had flown in the face of the modern trend by following City instead of rivals United - blinked unknowingly at their screens. Those a little older might at least have been somewhat familiar with the name, perhaps heard some of the outrageous stories with which it had become associated. Anyone who had been watching football when Allison was in his glorious, exaggerated prime in the 1960s through to the '80s, was shocked by what they saw, even those who had heard the stories of his mental deterioration. The imposing physical figure was still evident under his grey jacket, even if it was hunched forward in his seat, but the eyes that used to sparkle with a potent mix of charm, wit and cunning seemed glazed and distant. The expression behind which a thousand schemes used to play, whether planning the next big game or deciding where to dine with his latest female companion, appeared bereft of any indication that he was aware of his surroundings.

On one hand, it was painful to see how one of the most expansive minds and sharpest personalities in football's recent history had been diminished by the illness of dementia, into whose grip he had been slipping more completely over the previous five years. At the same time it was a chance to turn to younger companions and say, 'See that guy there? Well, let me tell you . . .'

Preparation of this book was already well under way at the time of Allison's televised visit to the club where he had written himself into football's lore. Those interviewed in the aftermath shared those mixed feelings: sorrow at Allison's plight; pride that their careers, and lives, had been touched by him; and gratitude that, at least fleetingly, he had emerged from a regimented existence in his council-run nursing home and was back in the public eye, being acknowledged for something more than the fedora hat and fat cigar that had become the enduring image of the man they called Big Mal.

The ravages of his illness were something that Malcolm was powerless to prevent, although reports have suggested that his excessive alcoholic intake over the years contributed to the onset of his Alzheimer's-type affliction. His achievements in the game should, however, have afforded him the ability to live out his years in a little more physical comfort than has been the case. Scarcely any personal possessions survived the excesses of a man who placed no import on the accumulation of long-term wealth. Instead, his idea of being rich in his final days, he used to tell friends, was to be able to sit in a rocking chair with a big smile on his face, remembering – without regret – all the good times: the on-field success, the cigars, the best wines and all the beautiful women he had bedded. The cruel irony is that not only did the money all go, but many of those precious memories were eventually taken from him as well.

Yet the sad final chapter should not dominate the story of a life lived so fully. In Allison's case it would be impossible for it to do so anyway. A pioneer of modern football techniques while a player at West Ham, his loss of a lung to tuberculosis at the age of 31 ended his on-field career, but his recovery from the depression that followed implanted a passion and a zest for living that, for most of the time, survived the highs and lows that were partly thrown at him by fate and frequently self-created. When life kicked Allison,

his response was to kick back. Having reached the peak of the English game with City, he set himself up for a fall by describing how he would conquer Europe. When the boast came crashing around his ears, he simply picked himself up and did it the following year instead.

It is interesting that the man with whom Allison was most often bracketed at the peak of his career - in terms of coaching ability, achievement, outspokenness and, ultimately, human weakness - was another whose playing days had been cut short by circumstance: Brian Clough. 'One of the aches in Malcolm's life was that he wanted to be a better player than he was,' says friend and journalist James Lawton. 'He marvelled at the young Brian Clough and envied his talent. That created a little tension in him. He wasn't as good a player as he wanted to be and his career ended prematurely, and I think in the early days it was what made him such a dynamite coach.'

There was a time when Clough and Allison were the 'people's champions' of English football, the men the fans wished to entrust with the task of guiding the fortunes of the England team. Of course, the Football Association would no more appoint one of them to the post of England manager than the various governments would think to name either on any kind of honours list.¹

Allison was a man of extremes. When talking about his burning desire to create the best football team in the country, Manchester City players glow with their descriptions of the fanatically driven coach who inspired them to collective achievement and personal overfulfilment of potential. Virtually every player interviewed for this book believes that on a one-on-one basis Allison improved them - from members of the West Ham youth team to experienced men like Tony Book, who was turned from a bricklaying non-League footballer into a trophy-winning First Division captain. Then there were lower division signings such as Colin Bell, Mike Summerbee and Francis Lee, who were

moulded into England players within a few months of each other.

‘Malcolm rubbed off on you,’ Bell explains. ‘You might have been a half decent player, but he gave you an extra 10 per cent, added something to your game and gave you a cutting edge. Those of us who were connected with him know it was a great thing that he has been in our lives.’

Away from football, Malcolm was no less committed. Michael Parkinson once described him as ‘possibly the least tranquillised Englishman alive’. Enjoying life was something he did to the limit – whether it was ordering the best champagne for everyone or taking home the prettiest girl. Money meant nothing, as long as he had enough to order the next round. Even if he didn’t, he would still insist that the drinks were on him.

With the extremes came the contradictions. He was generous to a fault with his friends and he embraced and trusted his fellow man. That was why he got on so well with a number of criminals. It was not just circumstances that made that happen – notably his spell as a nightclub owner in London – but his willingness to identify good in others. It showed in his approach to football. His personality was to see the best in people, which was why he preferred to concentrate on getting the maximum out of his own players rather than become a fearful coach in the manner of Don Revie.

Yet he also embraced more than his fair share of females and often overlooked his obligation to those women who were closest to him. The fact that he was open and honest about his affairs, confessing to his weaknesses and never seeking to justify them by blaming those behind whose backs he went, contains a certain honesty and virtue. But that is of little comfort to those hurt by his actions: the wives left waiting at home, the children denied the presence of their father.

Tales relating to that aspect of Malcolm Allison's character form an undeniable part of his story and are present within these pages. Insight is offered where appropriate by those close to the source, yet the intention is to relate such stories without celebration or condemnation.

Another contradiction: Malcolm was a physically imposing man, with an aura of confidence that merely added to the force of his presence. Former City player Ian Mellor tells a story to illustrate that. 'I remember being in the players' lounge after a game and it was packed shoulder to shoulder, with twice as many people as should have been in there. Malcolm walked in and said something simple like, "Is Glyn Pardoe in here?" The whole place just stopped dead. You could have heard a pin drop. That was the power of the man: to walk in a room of a hundred people and silence them with one question.'

And Rodney Marsh remembers becoming the biggest signing in Manchester City's history when he was bought for £200,000, yet as he walked to the ground with Allison at his side it was Malcolm to whom the autograph hunters flocked.

Privately, however, Allison went through periods when he felt anything but big. He was racked by doubt bordering on self-loathing. When, having moved on from City, he suffered successive relegations as manager of Crystal Palace, he spent tortured nights in his London flat looking for answers that had previously seemed to come to him so effortlessly. Thoughts of suicide invaded his moments of sleeplessness.

Malcolm had truly turned into Big Mal when he became a nationally recognised figure during his irreverent, outrageous television appearances during the 1970 World Cup finals. He had become the voice of the common man. The showman within his psyche, never far from the surface, developed an addiction to the spotlight. He was no longer content to be second in command at Maine Road and he plotted to dissolve the partnership with manager Joe Mercer that had brought such success. Yet Allison without the

presence of City's senior citizen was like a lead guitarist without the grounding influence of his rhythm section. Lacking someone to provide a framework for his genius, his work became a series of tuneless flights of fancy. Even before Allison helped to engineer the departure of the man who had taken him to City in 1965, leading football writer Ken Jones was commenting:

Talented, magnetic but intolerant to the point where football management was always likely to blow up in his face, Allison found at Maine Road the perfect level at which to work, the ideal man to work with. He could unroll the full scope of his talent yet there was always a voice to utter a warning when the steam was building up to a head.

Having decided to go it alone, first at City, then at Crystal Palace and various other teams, success in England deserted him, his only achievements of note coming on the foreign fields of Portugal and the Middle East. And so his personality had to work even harder to maintain his celebrity profile. What other explanation could there be for stunts like that which found soft-porn star Fiona Richmond naked in the bath with Allison and his Palace players. Had he achieved more at Palace, perhaps the Big Mal persona that eventually took over and helped to undermine his football endeavours would have been kept in check. Allison became a modern-day football Jekyll and Hyde, trapped in a vicious circle from which there was apparently no escape.

Such a flaw prevented him from creating a long-term legacy of on-field achievement. Instead, most of his employments ended in acrimonious sackings, the result of failure on the field, confrontation with the board or lurid stories of his private life - and often all three. Francis Lee, who has known Allison as well as anyone over the past four decades, suggests, 'When you look at people like Alex Ferguson, Bill Shankly and Arsène Wenger, the great thing they have had is consistency. They have been in one place for a long time and generated success. That was something

Malcolm couldn't achieve. As soon as things started going well, he would create trouble, just because he wanted to.'

For all the importance to this story of the gambler, the womaniser, the party animal and the personality, it is Malcolm Allison the football man that remains at its heart. Before there was the champagne, there was the young player who, inspired by the great Hungarians of the 1950s, sought to drag football single-handedly into the modern age by changing the way of life at West Ham. Before the fedora, there was the budding coach who came back from two years outside football to prove his potential during an apprenticeship with Cambridge University, Bath City and Plymouth Argyle. Before the cigar-smoking TV pundit, there was the man who helped lead Manchester City from the Second Division to the League Championship inside three years and spent the next two seasons winning just about every cup competition on offer. And before the man who lurched from one professional and personal disaster to another, there was the dynamic, energetic, groundbreaking coach whose methods helped to inspire a paradigm change in English football.

Without him there would have been no Big Mal.

The formative years of one of the most colourful characters to inhabit British sport in the second half of the twentieth century were spent in and around the London of the Second World War. Born in Dartford on 5 September 1927, Malcolm Alexander Allison would recall much of his childhood having consisted of 'drab, grey days filled with ration books and demob overcoats'. He seemed determined to spend the rest of his life compensating.

Allison's youth, however, was a long way from the kind of deprivation endured by many of his contemporaries. His parents, Charlie and Doris, while not rich, were comfortable, thanks to Charlie's job as an electrician, which often forced him away from home on contract work. With brothers Roy,

Clive and Morris, and sister Pauline, Malcolm was moved, shortly after his birth, to the south-east London suburb of Bexleyheath.

Until the Enclosure Act passed through Parliament in the early nineteenth century, giving landowners the right to secure their property from squatters and beginning a programme of town development, Bexleyheath had earned notoriety as a raw, open stretch of land patrolled by highwaymen. They picked off their victims as they travelled along Watling Street, the old Roman road between London and Dover. Given the company he would keep at various stages in his later life, it is easy to imagine Malcolm, had he grown up in such times, being attracted to the glamour and bravado of such men.

By the time the Allison family arrived, a period of concerted development throughout the 1930s had seen the now respectable market town expanding away from the immediate surrounds of Watling Street, offering Malcolm a semi-detached upbringing that was, notwithstanding the disruption of the war, contentedly unremarkable. His academic achievements fell into the same category. 'My schooldays, affected by war-time evacuations, had been sketchy as legally possible,' he confessed.

One of his earliest reports said that he was 'good at sport, but uses his mouth too much' and Allison would claim to have deliberately failed the entry examination for the local grammar school - much to his father's disapproval - because he didn't want to be stuck anywhere they played only rugby. In Brian Belton's book, *Days Of Iron*, Allison explained:

All I wanted for Christmas as a kid was football gear, boots and so on. I just loved the game. My mother's family was very football orientated. Her two brothers both played good amateur football. They used to give me a lift on the handlebars of their bikes to go with them to different matches.

Attending Central School in Bexleyheath, Allison played in the football team as an 11 year old against boys three years his senior. Teachers and parents gradually came to accept that football was the most potent force in his life and training with a young professional called Alf Rosier, who was on Fulham's books, enriched his education in the game. 'We used to practise things together,' Allison said. 'He was a big influence on me.' Malcolm's competitive nature made an early appearance when he won the school's Victor Ludorum sports trophy, but only after he tripped his closest rival in a vital race. He at least had the decency to feel ashamed when he collected the award from his headmaster.

His appearances as a scheming inside-forward for the St John's Boys Club team in the Dartford Minor League were good enough to earn him selection for the league's representative team. It was there he teamed up, for the first of many times, with Derek Ufton, who had achieved his call-up while playing for rival team Borough Juniors. 'We were boys of 13 and 14 playing against 18 year olds,' Ufton explains. 'Malcolm was always going to be the great player. He had marvellous skill on the ball at a young age. And he was taller than most of us so he always seemed to have that swagger about him.'

After giving polite consideration to following his father into an apprenticeship in electrical engineering, Allison began work as a messenger for a Fleet Street photographic agency and was thrilled to be given an assignment at one of the wartime FA Cup finals played at Wembley. The glamour of the job quickly faded, though, when he was sent from the stadium with only a few minutes played to get some plates back to the office for developing.

As it turned out, Allison was becoming a good enough footballer that he was not going to have to satisfy his dreams vicariously by witnessing the feats of others. Charlton Athletic had noted his prowess and at the age of 15 he was offered the chance to play in a trial game. Nervous

and short on confidence, he was instructed to line up at centre-forward, from where he proceeded to score a hat-trick of goals to earn an invitation to sign for the club as an amateur. Various accounts have Allison playing games for non-League Erith and Belvedere around that time, although the club's own records suggest that a few wartime reserve games might have been all that he managed. At 17, however, he reserved a place for his name in the official annals of the sport when he signed as a professional for Charlton.

It was February 1945, with the war in Europe entering its final phase, when Allison reported to The Valley as an apprentice. The often-haphazard nature of football during those years of conflict meant that he was soon given his first experience of big-game nerves. Teams rarely knew their line-ups until moments before kick-off, often relying on players securing military leave or guest performers turning up from their local postings. The late arrival of George Green for a game against an Arsenal team that included the great Cliff Bastin meant that Allison was told to get undressed. Gripped by 'terrible fear', Allison felt a wave of relief when the face of Green at last appeared round the changing-room door.

Allison spent most of his opening months at The Valley - which he called a 'vast scruffy bowl of concrete' - in a state of excited awe. He would rush to the newspaper stand to see his name printed in the junior team line-ups, saying that 'it filled my whole body with a sense of achievement'. The inferiority complex that he carried around with him in those teenage years would provide him with an empathy in later life when, as a coach, he was confronted by nervous young players about to be thrown in at the deep end. Allison would attempt to retain a sense of that frightened boy who'd thought he was facing Bastin. 'I have never tried to lose the memory of how difficult it could be to play well,' he would say.

There was little opportunity for Allison to become more comfortable in his surroundings. His national service papers dropped through the letterbox in the autumn and he was off on a journey that would open up a whole new world of football.

A dreary day in Maidstone in December 1945 held little promise of the range of experience that lay ahead of Private Allison as he reported for duty with his fellow conscripts. The next three years, much of it spent in Austria, would be at times eye-opening, and at others heart-rending. All of it would broaden Allison's mind, leaving him to report, 'Though I never lost my ambition to make the game my life, the army did teach me that football was no more than an aspect, perhaps a reflection, of the hard business of life.'

Allison witnessed the misery of those stationed at a camp in Klagenfurt - Czech, Ukrainian and Russian refugees whose plight tore at his spirit. One night, as he sat in a truck that was driving past the camp, a woman threw herself and a baby in front of the vehicle. Such despair in others seemed to show Allison that life was for living. In future years, the image would come back to him when he saw fellow managers so racked with fear and anguish over a mere game of football.

Yet the military also helped to lay out in front of Allison the rewards that life could offer. A two-week visit to Cortina in the Italian Alps to compete in the army skiing championships transported him into a colourful world of capitalism, the black market, a thriving café society and beautiful women. After the grimness of wartime Britain, this was Allison's first taste of the high life - even if he was, on this occasion, more observer than consumer. 'I absorbed the pattern of these extraordinary lifestyles, and the feeling came to me very strongly that I could never be content with an ordinary life. I had to have all this colour, all this exhilaration for myself.'

There were the inevitable scrapes, most notably when he escaped with a week's fatigues after he and a prisoner he was guarding stole and killed a chicken to supplement their rations and ended up pulling a gun on a pair of Yugoslav border guards. And there was the introduction to the joys of female company, a force that was to run so powerfully through his future life.

And of course, there was football. Allison was in the habit of hitting the parade ground at 5 a.m. every day to go through his daily training routine, a discipline that so impressed his commanding officer that the rest of the camp was ordered to rise an hour earlier to join him. Asked to organise the battalion's football team, he led them to victory in the Regimental Cup and also played some games for a local team, FC Wacker Innsbruck.

The most important part of Allison's military football education came at the Prater Stadium in Vienna, a venue that was to feature large in his future career but for now was where he took the opportunity to watch the training sessions of the young players of the Austrian national team - including the elegant midfielder Ernst Ocwirk. 'I liked the way they enslaved the ball. They made it do all the work. They were neat and controlled. There was nothing haphazard or crude about their work and I thought to myself, "Surely this is the wave of the future. This is what we have to do in England."'

Allison was struck by the 'purpose and knowledge' demonstrated by the trainers, the variety of the routines. Every player was kept interested. Everything was done for a reason. It left him feeling excited about his own football future as the end of his national service approached. In the hands of professionals in England, coupled with what he had learned from the Austrians, he felt sure that his game would develop at a great rate. He was soon to learn that others did not share his vision.

Demobbed and back at Charlton, Allison – not for the last time in his career – felt immediate discontent with his surroundings. Charlton were a First Division club and had been in two FA Cup finals while Allison was in army uniform, losing to Derby in 1946 and beating Burnley a year later. Yet he could not help but be hugely disappointed at the approach of the club compared with what he had witnessed overseas. ‘It was like getting in a time machine and finding yourself travelling in the wrong direction.’

Life in post-war Britain might have been moving forward at a significant pace but football was showing little inclination to keep up. While the introduction of the National Health Service and the nationalisation of major industries were shoving the country into a new age of social responsibility, the keepers of the national sport remained mired in pre-war complacency. So eager had the country been for the return of major sports events that all club directors had to do was throw open the doors of their often derelict and unsafe grounds and sit back and count the cash. Little of it found its way into the pockets of players who, even with appearance money and win bonuses, were picking up less than £10 a week. As more than 40 million spectators a season turned out for Football League matches in the late 1940s, English football patted itself on the back and kidded itself that everything was just grand.

Few professional players, whose relatively glamorous existence offered some release from the post-war austerity suffered by the average working man, were ready to question the health of their sport. Allison was one of the minority. What he experienced at Charlton had the genteel, civilised feel of a tea dance rather than the vigorous, challenging ambience he expected of a professional football club. Charlton goalkeeper Sam Bartram spoke of the ‘wonderful atmosphere’ at The Valley, adding, ‘the club has been a supremely happy one and because of that, it has

enjoyed success on the field. There has been a minimum of bickering and a maximum of helpful cooperation.'

Eddie Firmani, the South African forward who made his name in English football at Charlton in the 1950s, offered a similar description. 'Charlton possessed something neither money nor the honours of the game could secure for us: a wonderful family spirit; an atmosphere in which every fellow trusted the other chap; a club-spirit which meant every player would fight his heart out for the good of Charlton Athletic.'

But Allison was no longer the awestruck kid checking the newspapers for mention of his name, content just to be part of the professional game. He had grown into a cynical, disillusioned young man. All this talk of 'jolly good chaps' meant nothing to him. As he looked around he saw no one who shared his view of the way football should be played or operated. Where were the men from whom he could learn, who were willing to nurture a young talent?

He certainly didn't feel that Jimmy Seed, the manager who had led the team from Third to First Division in the 1930s, was such a man. 'To me he didn't grasp the essentials of the job,' was Allison's damning verdict.

What he encountered, however, was largely symptomatic of the era. Tactics, coaching and thoughtful preparation were still new concepts for most teams - totally alien to many more. English football had barely progressed over the previous half-century. The only widespread on-field advance had been when Herbert Chapman, the innovative former Huddersfield and Arsenal manager of the '20s and '30s, moved back his centre-half to play as a dedicated defender between the two full-backs, creating the classic 'WM' formation. Until the Second World War, most Football League teams had still been overseen by a 'secretary-manager', who was often regarded as little more than an office boy by the club directors. His administrative duties were frequently considered more important than getting the

players ready to win games. Only relatively recently had realisation dawned on the managers that, if directors were happy to calmly toss them aside when results went against them, perhaps they ought to think a little more deeply about ways of influencing events on the pitch. Even the concept of the manager having sole responsibility for picking the team was considered newfangled.

‘Managers at that time were not used to bringing in fresh ideas,’ says Dave Sexton, a striker who would become a teammate of Allison’s and go on to be one of the most respected coaches in English football. ‘It was like they were forbidden to do anything new.’

Derek Ufton, soon to join Allison at Charlton, adds, ‘There wasn’t coaching in those days. You ran round and round the field, had a practice game on the Tuesday but never really saw the ball after that for the rest of the week. Wednesday and Thursday would be strength and running and on Friday you had a massage and waited for the team to go up on the board. All my life I had played up the street with a ball every day and once I became a professional I hardly saw it. The view was that you would be hungrier for it on Saturday.’

Bartram, who had been at the club since 1934, was typical of the older generation of players who happily accepted that the manager knew all there was to know. He certainly held a very different view from that of Allison, and his description of Seed in his autobiography suggests that the manager would not have expected to have his knowledge and authority challenged by a young upstart. ‘No man in the game, I think it is safe to say, knows more about football, footballers and football tactics than he,’ Bartram gushed, adding, ‘It is an unwritten law at The Valley that the boss must never be let down.’

Yet Allison found Seed to be a remote figure, with whom he had virtually no personal contact. There was no explanation of why he was left in the third team on an occasion when injury to centre-half Harold Phipps left

everyone at the club expecting a first-team call-up for Allison – a snub that left him feeling ‘discarded’.

A frequently recounted tale was that of Seed trying to impress a visiting member of the South African FA by shouting encouragement to Allison as he lapped the field during a training session. Allison resented the fact that he had said nothing to him for years but was now trying to appear like a father figure to impress a visiting dignitary. He was even angrier the next day when Seed picked him up on not having responded by saying, ‘When I speak to you I expect a reply.’

Allison detested what he saw as an old-boys’ network of former players staying in the game to earn a living as trainers without showing the least interest in doing the job with any degree of professionalism. He had little regard for the football knowledge of Charlton trainer Jimmy Trotter, who also filled that role with the England team, and whose sessions amounted to little more than tedious amounts of jogging. Even the training kit appeared designed to sap the players’ enthusiasm, consisting as it did of a pile of shirts and shorts that were thrown on the floor, prompting an unseemly scramble for items that were clean, undamaged and came close to fitting properly.

Ufton had followed his friend’s path from the army to Charlton, thanks to a chance meeting at a dance on the day he was demobbed. Having informed Allison that he was about to sign for Cardiff, he was told, ‘You don’t want to go all that way. Meet me on Wednesday and I will see if I can get you a trial.’ Ufton took his opportunity, signed for the club and, ironically, made it into the first team before Allison.

He clearly remembers Allison’s discontent at The Valley. ‘The thing that upset him was that he had been an inside-forward with great skills as a young player, a craftsman who could bamboozle the opposition. Now he had gone back to centre-half and he couldn’t understand why Jimmy Seed

didn't put him straight in the team. Malcolm was outspoken and was a very popular member of the club. He was a bit different and had a more flamboyant style than most of us. He liked the West End and the rest of us liked to stay in suburbia. I think it became a bit of a personal thing with him and Jimmy. He always had this feeling against authority and that would be why Jimmy turned against him. It would get to his ears that Malcolm would be saying things and then Malcolm would argue the point instead of accepting that Jimmy was manager.'

Despite being out of the first team, Allison had no fear of challenging the senior players, even though the strongly held views of a lad barely out of his teens could on occasions be greeted with ridicule by elders who felt Allison's opinions had no basis in experience. He had sufficient self-awareness to realise that his own ability as a player left something to be desired, yet felt there was no one to whom he could turn for advice. The one player with whom he did bond was Scotland international forward Tommy Brown, who had been bought from Millwall and made no pretence of having any respect for the manager. It was the sharp-dressed Brown who took Allison on his first night out in the West End.

In the days when low salaries meant clubs could afford to stockpile players in their second and third teams, Allison's Football League debut did not arrive until the age of 22, in a 2-0 defeat at Manchester City on Christmas Eve 1949. He played his second, and final, game for Charlton three days later in a 2-1 home defeat against Portsmouth. 'Jimmy didn't contemplate him again for some reason after that,' says Ufton, who had already established himself at left-half. 'Harold Phipps was the regular centre-half and Jimmy brought him back. Then after Malcolm left Charlton I moved over to centre-half, which was always a bit of a bone of contention between us.'

The early seeds of Allison's coaching career were planted in that first game in Manchester, where he realised he had 'burned myself out on the training ground' and was shattered physically and confused mentally. He was surprised at the lack of instruction coming from the Charlton bench, recalling, 'It seemed like madness in this ultimate team game to send out men with no clear idea of how they related to each other.'

He took the opportunity to take part in some basic coaching at The Valley, working on the technique of shooting, heading and kicking, but he had long since realised that there was a strict limit on how far he could progress his career without moving away from Charlton. In February 1951, a day after he had told Seed how bad he thought the training was at the club, he was sold to West Ham for £7,000. The move owed much to the presence on the Charlton staff of Benny Fenton, who recommended Allison to his brother Ted, manager of West Ham, as a possible long-term replacement for stalwart centre-half Dick Walker. It was with no regrets that Allison turned his back on The Valley - and walked into one of the most significant phases of his career.

TACTICS IN THE TEACUPS

'Frequently the more trifling the subject, the more animated and protracted the discussion'

- *nineteenth-century US President
Franklin Pierce*

The Upton Park at which Malcolm Allison arrived in February 1951 was not exactly thriving. Relegated from the First Division in 1932, West Ham United Football Club's biggest annual achievement was simply keeping its head above the deep financial waters that constantly threatened to pull it down.

It was a struggle, however, that was borne with a smile. Maybe it was something to do with London, the spirit of the Blitz and all that chirpy Cockney nonsense, but – just like Charlton – the Hammers were a happy-go-lucky club who placed more emphasis on fun than professionalism. Irishman Frank O'Farrell, who had arrived from Cork in 1948, explains, 'It was a laid-back family club. They hadn't been anywhere in football terms for years but it was a nice club to play for, full of nice people. There was not the ruthlessness that there is in modern football.'

Since the summer of 1950, the burden of improving the team's fortunes on meagre resources had rested on the shoulders of Ted Fenton. Born in the Forest Gate area of east

London, Fenton had become an effective wing-half for his local team, playing 176 games for the Hammers before the war and appearing in their 1940 War Cup final victory over Blackburn Rovers at Wembley. Having served as a physical training sergeant major during the Second World War, Fenton had gone into management at Southern League Colchester United, where he captured national attention with some notable FA Cup results. Rejoining West Ham as assistant manager in 1948, he had to wait only two years before ascending to the position of manager in place of Charlie Paynter, a Hammers servant for 50 years as player, trainer and, since 1932, manager. Fenton had been seen all along as Paynter's successor and the serious prospect of demotion to the Third Division had made it clear that the time had arrived to effect the handover.

Fenton quickly fell in love with the cut and thrust of transfer market negotiation, but it was his very first signing, Allison, who was to remain his most significant piece of business. Even the official club history acknowledges that the capture of Allison 'represented a watershed in the history of the Hammers'. Full-back John Bond, who was to become one of Malcolm's best friends at the club, says, 'He made a big impression on most people as soon as he arrived from Charlton. He was a big, brash good-looking fellow who had plenty to say for himself and was mad keen on football.'

For Fenton, it was an important symbolic signing as the physically imposing 6ft 1in. Allison, named as team captain, was bought to take over the shirt of Dick Walker, the strongest link to the Paynter era. 'It was difficult for Malcolm,' says O'Farrell. 'He was replacing a very good and very popular player who was reaching the end of his career. Dick had a great rapport with the fans, had a proud record as a paratrooper in the war and was very personable. He was one of those characters who can say anything and get away with it. Malcolm was obviously brought in to replace him so it took him a while to sell himself to the crowd.'

Allison happily accepted the challenge, relieved to have escaped the retarded footballing environment of The Valley, and for a short while he was far happier with his lot at West Ham. At least he was in the team. But it did not take long – approximately six months – for him to be afflicted by the same old frustrations with English football. The pastoral air that surrounded the East End club was, according to O’Farrell, ‘the sort of thing Malcolm saw as a hindrance to progress’.

Allison discovered that West Ham was even more backward than Charlton – ‘a feat which I would have believed impossible’, he said. Training had no more purpose than at The Valley and being even shorter, necessitated less commitment from the players. The sessions took place on a scrub of land at the back of the stadium, where clusters of trees offered the players the chance to break off from their runs for a crafty cigarette.

For Allison, the important difference between Charlton and West Ham was that, as an older player and a more confident personality, he felt able to effect some kind of change – and he had the single-minded determination to do so. He admitted, ‘I’m amazed how one-dimensional I was in those days. My dedication was absolute. I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink and I never had sex within three days of a match. Incredible!’

O’Farrell adds, ‘Malcolm arrived at the club just when more people in English football were beginning to say that we should be looking at ourselves and the way we approached the game. He brought that sort of attitude with him.’

Allison began to draw up his own practice schedules for the team, finding allies for his methods among the other players. Eddie Lewis, a forward who would join West Ham after spells at Manchester United and Preston, had been used to training that consisted of little more than laps of the pitch followed by 15-a-side free-for-alls. ‘Under Malcolm

everything was so organised. One small group would be playing six versus six, another playing head tennis, another doing weights, another running. The whistle would blow and the groups would change. You didn't see any clubs doing that at that time.'

Fenton - who Allison felt had been 'promoted out of his depth' - might not have been much of a tactician, but his wheeler-dealing meant there was a steady influx of new players throughout Allison's time at West Ham. It was Malcolm's good fortune that so many of them responded to his football philosophies and the force with which he indoctrinated them. The list of Hammers colleagues who went on to managerial and coaching careers at the highest level - men such as Bond, O'Farrell, Noel Cantwell, Ken Brown, Dave Sexton, Malcolm Musgrove, Jimmy Andrews and Andy Nelson - is the most obvious testament to Allison's influence and the open-minded atmosphere that pervaded the Upton Park dressing-room during the 1950s.

A tight-knit group, they loved nothing more than to gather after training in Cassettari's, a Barking Road café just round the corner from the stadium, where they would talk about the game. And talk and talk. Even after evenings of greyhound racing, usually at Hackney or West Ham, several of them would regroup in the café's upstairs room to continue their debates, pushing salt cellars, cups and ketchup bottles around the tables like chess pieces as they discussed tactics. Bond recalls, 'We used to come out of that café smelling of egg and chips. Loads of the other lads would go to the pictures or snooker but Malcolm, Noel, me and a few others would go back to the ground. Malcolm was a big influence on people who wanted to know and listen.'

Sexton says, 'I don't know if it was Malcolm's idea originally, but he was in charge. Those meal times were very important because we used to explore different subjects and that was when people would come out with any ideas they had. As well as a working team, we were a talking team.'