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Mario Risoli

Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Epub ISBN: 9781780577012
Version 1.0
www.mainstreampublishing.com

First published in Great Britain in 2003 by
MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING (EDINBURGH) LTD
7 Albany Street
Edinburgh EH1 3UG

ISBN 1 84018 802 2

This edition, 2003

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank everyone who shared memories of John Charles with me. I am especially grateful to, in alphabetical order, Umberto Agnelli, Venanzio Cinus, Siriano Collini, Gareth Davies, George Edwards, Peter Harrison, David Hartshorne, Bobby Henning, Xavier Jacobelli, Don Murray, Charles Pickard, Richard Shepherd, Ceri Stennett and David Watkins. Staff at the main libraries in Cardiff, Hereford, Leeds and Merthyr Tydfil also provided invaluable help. Thanks also to my father, Saverio, for his tireless research skills, and my wife, Catherine, for her support and encouragement.

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CHAPTER ONE – FAREWELL SWANSEA

Twenty-seventh December 1931. Edward and Lillian Charles – already parents to a young daughter, Maureen – were celebrating the birth of a first son at their home in Alice Street, in Swansea's humble Cwmbwrla district. They called him William John Charles. Born at No. 9 in a row of 36 council-owned terraced houses, he was to become one of the world's greatest footballers.

It was no surprise to see Edward – known as Ned – coaxing his first son to kick a ball. Once a useful half-back himself, Ned played for Swansea Town reserves, but his playing days came to an end at Cwmbwrla Park when he broke a leg while turning out for a local team called Cwm Mission.

In May 1935, Lillian gave birth to a second son, Melvyn, and he too was encouraged to play football. Mel would become a fine player in his own right and in April 1955 the Charles brothers would play alongside each other for Wales for the first time, in a Home International Championship match against Northern Ireland at Belfast's Windsor Park.

The Charleses were a typical working-class family. Ned was a steel erector at the steelworks in Margam, just outside Swansea, and Lillian was a housewife who devoted herself to caring for the children. 'It was basically two families living in one house,' recalls Mel Charles of his upbringing in Alice Street. 'Mum, Dad, Maureen, John and myself lived in the middle room and my aunt lived in the back room. We didn't have a television, only a radio. We didn't know what television was.'

Money was tight in the Charles's household. 'I used to wear all of John's clothes,' says Mel. 'They went down right

through the family. We used to get a new outfit every Whitsun. We ate mostly baked beans with toast. That was what we were brought up on, although we would have chicken every Christmas.'

John and Mel were seven and four respectively when Winston Churchill announced Britain was at war with Nazi Germany. The Second World War brought destruction to many towns and cities across Britain but it was particularly unkind to Swansea, which was heavily bombed by the *Luftwaffe,* the arrival of which was always preceded by a horrifying orange-yellow flare that would puncture the night-time darkness.

Germany's attacks on Swansea began in the early hours of 27 June 1940, and culminated in the devastating 'three-night blitz' in February 1941. Houses disintegrated, water mains were shattered, roads were blocked by charred rubble and the town centre was reduced to a mass of mangled iron. The *Luftwaffe* launched 44 raids on the South Wales town, killing 387 people, injuring 851 and damaging nearly 28,000 properties.

At the height of the bombings Ned and Lillian's two boys were evacuated to Llandeilo, a picturesque market town in Carmarthenshire, west of Swansea. 'I stayed with my sister and John stayed with someone else,' remembers Mel. 'But John was sent back home because he and another boy called Danny Sullivan were killing chickens. They were buggers, those two. I think they were killing the chickens and then trying to sell them.'

John and Mel were close, with Mel following his older brother in everything he did. 'John did a paper round, I did a paper round. John boxed, I boxed,' explains Mel. 'When John joined the cadets, I joined the cadets.' The cadets was an extra-curricular activity based at Manselton Senior School, open to all young boys, not just Manselton pupils. 'We only joined the cadets so we could have a uniform,' smiles Mel. 'We had an Army kit – brown shirt, long trousers and boots.

It was all free. At the time most kids were wearing shorts but we would have a pair of longs. We used to think we were grown up.'

Like all brothers they had their squabbles. 'We used to fight like hell. I remember one time just before Guy Fawkes' Night,' continues Mel. 'We decided to do "Penny for the Guy" so we could raise the money to buy fireworks. I was ten and John said to me, "You stay off school and take the Guy around." So I missed school for a week doing "Penny for the Guy". We got the money to buy the fireworks, which were a mixture of bangers and sparklers. Anyway, John kept all the bangers, which were the things to have, and gave me all the sparklers. Didn't we have a bloody fight! Dad had to separate us. We also had a fight over rabbits. John had a black one and I had a white one. John's rabbit died and he wanted my white one.'

Occasionally, they would team up to scrump apples from a nearby orchard. Mel would be the lookout on top of the wall while John stole the apples and hid them under the mattress of their bed. One night, the antics ended in a beating from their strict father. The man who owned the orchard, a Mr Pope, knocked on the door of No. 9 Alice Street. Ned answered and was told his two sons had been seen pinching apples. Ned refused to believe the accusation and said, 'They couldn't have taken your apples, they're in bed.' After Mr Pope left, Ned confronted his sons who were pretending to be asleep. 'He started shaking the bed and all these apples started dropping onto the floor,' laughs Mel. 'He hit the hell out of us with his belt, and it was some belt. We didn't take any more apples after that. They were beautiful sweet apples as well.'

John was educated at Cwmdu Junior School before moving to Manselton Senior School at the age of 11. David Farmer, a classroom contemporary at Cwmdu, remembers John's early sporting ability. 'He was not only good at football, he was good at cricket.' Farmer recalls a school cricket match

at Cwmrhydyceirw, in the Swansea Valley. ‘He was a very pacey bowler and in this match he was bowling at a spot on the length. He was bowling so fast it became dangerous and John had to be taken off.’

John was only interested in sport and had no inclination for the academic side of school. Farmer says on one occasion, after misbehaving during lessons, John was summoned to the front of the class and caned by the teacher who told him between each whack, ‘Wake up, Charles! Wake up! You will never make a living playing football!’

In an era without amusement arcades and home entertainment, boys growing up in Swansea during the 1930s and 1940s spent their leisure time playing football, cricket and other sports. The Charles boys were especially fortunate since Cwmbwrla Park, a hundred yards from Alice Street, was virtually on their doorstep.

‘In those days boys played football, rugby, cricket or they boxed. There was nothing else for us to do. We didn’t have television or video games,’ says Glyn Davies, who was at Manselton with Charles and who played alongside him for Swansea Schoolboys. Davies, who went on to play for Derby County, grew up on the other side of Cwmbwrla Park, in Pentregethin Road.

‘Everybody used to end up in the park. We’d throw some coats down and play football. A two-a-side game would become three-a-side, then four-a-side and it would grow and grow,’ says Davies. ‘We used to have competitions, boys living in one street would play boys living in another. They were marvellous days. The only things we had to worry about were the air raids.’

John and Mel were among the vast numbers playing football at Cwmbwrla. ‘During the holidays we played football all day in the park and we’d be there every day,’ says Mel. ‘We used to have half a pitch each and you could end up playing 20-a-side. Sometimes there were so many

kids playing in the park that you couldn’t get on. That’s all we did, play football. We’d leave our house at eight in the morning and we wouldn’t go back home until nine at night.’

Mel’s recollections are backed up by an interview his father gave in 1958 to the now-defunct *Empire News*. ‘John and Melvyn have been soccer crazy ever since I can remember,’ said Ned. ‘At home their mother seldom saw them. They spent every moment of their spare time in the fields and parks around Swansea kicking a ball about.’

Even though Ned introduced them to the sport he played as an amateur, Mel insists his father did not push his boys into pursuing football as a career. ‘We didn’t know what we were going to do. We had no idea we were going to end up as professional footballers,’ explains Mel, who would sign for Arsenal in 1959 – two years after his brother’s big-money move from Leeds United to Italian giants Juventus. ‘My father never said, “I want you to be footballers.” It sort of happened naturally. He let us do our own thing. I’m not having a go at him but Dad didn’t take much interest in us.’

Cwmbwrla Park hosted some decent footballers during the 1940s and John, along with his friends, would watch and listen. ‘There was a lot of knowledge being thrown about free of charge,’ explains Davies. ‘We learned the little tricks of the game at Cwmbwrla – how to pass the ball, how to receive it, how to play it first time, how to keep it moving on a muddy surface. There were a lot of good players about. Some went into the Welsh League and could have gone even further but didn’t, either because of bad luck or circumstances.’

In those days of food rations and coupons for clothes, a pair of football boots was a luxury that most families could not afford. Ned, however, hit on a clever solution that allowed his sons to play football wearing their everyday boots. ‘Dad was something of a cobbler and he put these leather strips on our boots,’ says Mel. ‘The strips acted as pegs. If we didn’t have them we’d be slipping all over the

place. When we finished playing football, Dad would take off the strips and we could wear them to school.'

The young John had a knack of wearing shoes without laces and on one occasion, while playing a kickabout game in Alice Street, it cost his father a pane of glass. He took a shot at a heap of coats that were serving as a goal only for his shoe to fly off and shatter the front window of a neighbour's house. Ned was never happy with his sons playing football in the street, often warning them that if they did not stop a policeman would be along 'to lock them up'. This hollow threat fell on deaf ears.

John's childhood reads like something out of *Boy's Own*. With his gang of friends he would walk to Bracelet Bay, in the scenic resort of Mumbles, where they would dive into the sea from rocks. They would also go swimming in the lake at Afon-Llan, taking some bread so they could light a fire and make toast. Mooching through some of the town's many bombed buildings was another favourite – but frowned upon – pastime.

Then there was boxing. While in the cadets John tried his hand at 'the noble art' and it soon became apparent Ned's eldest son had the attributes to forge a career in the ring. 'John was a very good boxer. He could have been a professional footballer or a professional boxer,' says Mel. John would continue to box when he was in the Army doing his national service and there was even talk of him fighting Swansea-born heavyweight Dick Richardson.

Glyn Davies, who boxed against the young Charles, recalls, 'We used to go around the different clubs on a Friday night to box. John was a good boxer. He was a nice size and he had quick hands. He could have fought for the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) title. We had a boxing club at Manselton and one of our teachers, Herbie Morris, loved the sport. They would match boys up based on age and size. We all got a pasting now and again, even John.'

When John was ten, Dai Curvis, the Swansea ‘southpaw’ boxer who lived near the Charles family and who was carving out a name for himself in professional boxing, approached Ned about taking John under his wing. Ned was keen, not so John or his mother. According to Ned, his wife was ‘horrified’ at Curvis’s offer. Although John would later be crowned Army heavyweight champion, Ned later admitted his son was not cut out for the brutality of boxing. ‘John’s disposition was all wrong for boxing,’ he said. ‘In the ring you’ve got to have the killer instinct, you must be mean to all opponents, hurt them as much as you can. And as John confessed when I raised the point with him, “I don’t like to hurt people.”’ Curvis’s two sons, Brian and Cliff, took up boxing and, trained by their father, they both became British welterweight champions.

In a country where rugby is the national sport, Manselton Senior School had a reputation for putting the emphasis on football. It had won the Martin Shield – Swansea’s schoolboy championship – in 1935, sharing it with Danygraig Senior School, and did so again two years later, this time sharing it with Townhill Senior School who dominated the schoolboy scene during the late 1930s.

Soon after moving to Manselton, Charles, aged 11, made the school team playing as a left-half. ‘John was a natural sportsman,’ recalls Davies. ‘He was good at every ball game. He played cricket, he was a good tennis player. He was also good at table tennis.’ In his first season with the school team, Charles was a schoolboy championship winner. ‘We walked away with the title that year,’ continues Davies. ‘We hammered most sides and I don’t think we lost a game. We were a bit bigger than the other teams, and physically stronger.’

A year later, Charles won a place in the Swansea Schoolboys side where he continued to play left-half. He was one of four Manselton boys to get picked. Davies, Enoch

Williams and Brian Sykes – whose father was Swansea Town scout Joe Sykes – were the other three.

The schoolboy side played at St Helens, the home of Swansea Rugby Club, and the youngsters were watched by good-sized crowds. One match, against Aston Schoolboys, attracted 20,000.

Terry Medwin, who would go on to play for Swansea, Tottenham and Wales, recalls playing alongside Charles in that schoolboy side of the mid-1940s. An inside-forward in the team, he says, ‘Even at that young age John was a bit special. It wasn’t because of his height or bulk. He wasn’t that big then. There were seven or eight lads in that team who were taller than John. You could just tell that something was on the way. He had a lot of things going for him. Perhaps the biggest thing was his inner strength.’

Charles would become renowned for his awesome physical stature. In his prime he stood 6 ft 1 in. tall and weighed 13 st. 10 lb., most of it muscle. But in his early years, no one would have guessed the slight Charles would blossom into the ‘Gentle Giant’. Indeed, when he was a 14 year old on the Swansea Town groundstaff, Roy Paul, the club’s star player – who later skippered Manchester City to FA Cup glory in 1956 – referred to Charles as ‘a slip of a boy’. Adds Medwin, ‘All the lads in the schoolboy team stopped growing at 16 or 17 but John carried on and became a man-mountain.’

Bobby Henning was centre-forward for the Swansea Schoolboys and as the goal-getting striker he should have dominated the write-ups in the local paper, the *South Wales Evening Post.* Yet Charles, playing in the unglamorous half-back position, began to steal his thunder. ‘I remember meeting John for the first time at the trials for the schoolboy team and he was the boy to look up to. Even then he always stood out and he was attracting all the attention,’ says Henning. ‘He always got a mention in the local paper, no matter how the game went.’

It was rare for Charles not to be acknowledged in a schoolboy match report. In a 10–0 mauling of Briton Ferry Schoolboys during the 1944–45 season, the *South Wales Evening Post* said the Swansea defence 'was well served by John Charles'. Henning bagged a hat-trick in a 4–0 win over Aston Schoolboys in December 1945 but 'Charles, at left-half, played an intelligent game'. In a 5–1 victory against Cardiff Schoolboys in January 1946 'the Swansea half-backs [Glyn Davies and Charles] were so complete that their forwards enjoyed a field day'. And in a 3–0 win over Bristol Schoolboys, Davies and Charles 'kept plying their forwards with perfect passes and at the same time held the Bristol attack in a vice-like grip'.

Medwin, who grew up close to Swansea Prison, where his father worked as a prison officer, recalls, 'Because I grew up in a different part of the town the only time I mixed with John was when we were with the schoolboy team. But one time I remember going with him to his house in Cwmbwrla. We planned to play football there in the afternoon and I was a sort of guest. He said to me, "Come on, Terry, let's go and have something to eat." I thought to myself, "Oh, that's nice of you, John." So we went into his house and he got a fresh loaf out, cut four slices of bread, buttered them and added strawberry jam. You were really living if you ate this in the 1940s. Then he cut three slabs of cake. It looked delicious. And do you know what? John ate the lot. I didn't have any of it. John scoffed all the bread and all the cake.'

The English Schools' Trophy, the schoolboy version of the FA Cup, was the silverware every side wanted to win. Swansea had a good record in the competition. Runners-up in 1934 and 1935, they lost to Manchester Schoolboys on both occasions. They won the trophy for the first time in 1939, beating Chesterfield Schoolboys. With the likes of Charles, Medwin, Henning and Davies in the team, the class of 1945–46 fancied their chances of bringing the trophy back to South Wales for a second time. 'You could see John

was going to be a very good player. He was a natural, so quick and strong,' explains Davies, who was right-half in the schoolboy side. 'John was a bit more aggressive in those days. As he got older he quietened down. You knew which way he was going to go and that was up. There were only two things that could have stopped him – a bad injury and bad luck. Fortunately he avoided both.'

Swansea Schoolboys began their campaign against Bristol Schoolboys and easily dispatched the West Country side 3–0. Then came Reading Schoolboys, containing a young Johnny Brooks who would play for Tottenham and England. They were beaten 2–1, setting up a quarter-final clash against Leicester Schoolboys to be played at St Helens. In front of 20,000 people Swansea failed to book a place in the last four, drawing 1–1. Still, the *South Wales Evening Post* singled out the two Manselton pupils, Charles and Davies, for praise. The Swansea half-back line, it declared, is 'considered one of the best ever fielded by Swansea'.

The Welsh team travelled to the East Midlands for the replay. Medwin recalls the trip. 'John liked some fun. There was a bit of devilment in there. Whenever we went away with the schoolboy side, our parents used to give us a shilling and we'd end up playing cards for halfpennies or pennies. Anyway, we were playing cards in the room in Leicester and John started giggling. I asked him what he was laughing about. He said, "Nothing." But he carried on. He was taking all my pennies off me and do you know why? I was sitting in front of a wardrobe that had a mirror on it. Of course John could see what cards I had in the mirror.'

The replay was staged at Filbert Street, the home of Leicester City, with the hosts' Lord Mayor and his wife among the 14,465-strong crowd. It ended in disappointment for Charles and his teammates as the home side ran out 2–0 winners. 'We were very disappointed with that result,' says Medwin. 'I thought we were good enough to win the trophy

that year. The Leicester match was the only game we lost that season. They were too strong for us.'

Charles could take comfort from the glowing report in the *Leicester Mercury* which described him as 'an outstanding player'.

During the train journey back to Swansea, Bobby Henning witnessed the joker streak in Charles. 'The boys were sitting in different carriages. I was in a different one to Charlo. He came to our carriage door and said, "Do you want some ginger beer in there?" He handed over this bottle with something gold-coloured in it. The bottle was warm and it wasn't ginger beer inside. Someone had urinated in it. I don't know if it was Charlo.'

For Swansea, there was some consolation when they won the Welsh Shield, thrashing Aberdare 9–0 on aggregate. In the first leg at St Helens, they won 3–0 with Charles, according to the *South Wales Evening Post*, 'always endeavouring to initiate attacks'. In the return game at Aberaman Park, Charles scored in a 6–0 win. This was Swansea's first victory in the competition for eight years, although they had not competed during wartime.

Charles's outstanding performances for the schoolboy side did not go unnoticed. He had caught the eye of Yorkshireman Joe Sykes, who played centre-half for Swansea Town during the 1920s and 1930s and who was now scouting and coaching for the Second Division club. Sykes – who was known as 'the doyen of carpet passes' in his playing days – moved to Swansea from Sheffield Wednesday in 1924 and stayed there until his death in 1975. He was highly respected, bringing young players like Medwin, Ivor Allchurch and Cliff Jones to the Vetch Field. 'Joe could spot talent,' remarks Henning. 'He was the best. Everyone looked up to Joe.'

Sykes called at 9 Alice Street and invited John for a trial at the Vetch. It came as no surprise when Haydn Green, then Swansea Town manager, offered the 14 year old a place on

the groundstaff for fifteen shillings a week. Charles had the option of working as an electrician's apprentice but by now was set on becoming a professional footballer and he accepted Green's offer. Charles was the first of three groundstaff boys to join The Swans in the summer of 1946. Harry Griffiths soon followed, then Henning.

The groundstaff boys were assigned the laborious jobs around the Vetch – sweeping the stands, cleaning boots, weeding and forking the pitch, tidying the dressing-rooms, painting the railings, scrubbing the baths and other menial chores. At the time it was regarded as a rite of passage for those who dreamed of making a living as a professional footballer.

'We would arrive at the ground at about nine in the morning and we'd finish at about three in the afternoon,' recalls Henning. 'Weeding and re-seeding the pitch at the end of each season was the worst job. That was a real back-breaker. I remember they gave John and me the job of sweeping the North Bank after a big game. We didn't pick anything up, we just spread all the rubbish about. It looked worse than before and the groundsman played hell with us.'

That was not the only time Charles and Henning crossed the groundsman, Jim Fairweather. One afternoon he caught the pair playing football on the Vetch pitch, which was strictly out of bounds until matchdays. 'Jim always took two hours off for lunch. He used to go to The Glamorgan pub on Mumbles Road,' says Henning. 'When he had gone, we decided to have a kickabout in the goalmouth. It was about one in the afternoon and there wasn't anyone about. This one day he came back early and he played hell with us. He told us, "I'm taking you to see the manager tomorrow." And he did.'

By now Billy McCandless had replaced Green in the Vetch hot-seat. The Swans were relegated to Division Three in 1947 and after a poor start to the following season Green resigned. 'We went into McCandless's office but Jim didn't

come in with us, he stayed outside,' continues Henning. 'McCandless was quite nice to us. He didn't talk about playing on the pitch at all. "How much am I paying you lads then?" he asked us. We told him. "Have a rise next week," he said. So we came out with a rise. From fifteen shillings a week we went to twenty-five. When Jim saw us he asked, "Well, what did he say?" We told him he'd given us a rise and started laughing our heads off.'

Henning also remembers the morning when the groundstaff boys were asked to cement in the bases of the newly installed steel columns that would support the Centre Stand. The youngsters decided to leave their permanent mark, writing their names in the wet cement – R. Henning, T. Jones, H. Griffiths and so on. 'We came back from lunch and noticed how John had spelt his surname. He'd written Chales instead of Charles,' laughs Henning. 'He tried to rub it out. He nearly dug a hole trying to get rid of it but the cement had dried.' Charles's error has long since been covered up.

While he was on the groundstaff the former Manselton pupil suddenly shot up in size. As Henning remembers, 'When we were playing for Swansea Schoolboys, John was 4 inches shorter than me, but when he was about 15 he started to sprout. We had this tea cabin at the Vetch and I'll always remember John standing at the door one day. He looked like he'd just got out of bed. His trousers were halfway up his legs. When he started on the groundstaff a year earlier they fitted him. All of a sudden he just grew out of them.'

With no money to replace his wardrobe Charles would wear his father's trousers. One night, the bashful teenager was invited next door, to a party thrown by Betty Harris, his neighbour's daughter. With the party in full swing, there was a knock at the door. Betty answered. It was Ned. 'John are you in there?' he cried. 'I want my trousers because I'm going out!' A chorus of giggles followed.

When the groundstaff boys had finished working at the Vetch, they would play table tennis in the ground's now-demolished Double Decker Stand, or have a game of snooker in the town centre. En route, the gang would tease the many spivs who sold knock-off goods from the backs of lorries. If it was raining, Charles and his friends would play cricket underneath the exit of the Centre Stand.

They would also take the Mumbles tram to Victoria Park for a game of bowls and Henning recalls one such occasion when he accompanied Charles and Harry Griffiths. 'We were on the tram and the conductor yelled to the driver to close the doors. Just as he was about to do it Harry jumped out before a woman and a child who ended up getting caught in the doors. John had a right go at Harry and they ended up fighting on the road, one was kicking and the other was thumping.'

Charles had not lost his appetite for stealing apples, as fellow apprentices Henning, Griffiths and Terry Jones discovered one afternoon as they returned home from the Vetch. 'We stopped at this shop and I bought an apple. As the lady went into another room to get my change, three apples suddenly dropped to the floor,' says Henning. 'Charlo had his coat over his arm and he was trying to put the apples into a patch pocket but he missed the hole. We got out of the shop as quickly as we could and belted up the road. We never went back into that shop.'

At the Vetch, Charles played for Swansea Town's 'A team' in the local league and occasionally he made the Welsh League side but, with the first team playing well and challenging for promotion in 1948–49, a senior debut seemed a long way off. McCandless was not going to tinker with a winning team and, with the Swansea public clamouring for a return to Division Two, blooding youngsters was low on his agenda. But Charles was not unhappy. He was in the presence of his big hero, Roy Paul and, while performing his groundstaff duties, he would listen to the

first-team players and watch them in training, learning all the time. He was keen to pick up hints on how to succeed in professional football and would follow the first-team players everywhere, so much so that Paul nicknamed him ‘the Shadow’. Charles started to hang out at the Italian café on Nelson Street, near the Vetch, where the first-team players sometimes ate after training. Paul recalled one afternoon when he and his astonished teammates watched Charles devour two steak pies, a plate piled high with potatoes and vegetables and two helpings of apple tart, all washed down with tea. ‘I’m a growing lad,’ said Charles when he noticed his colleagues were watching him in amazement. Paul never forgot that remark and every time he and Charles met up to play for Wales during the 1950s, he would say to him, ‘Still a growing lad, John?’

Leaving his hometown club never entered Charles’s thoughts. To feed his hunger for competitive football he would turn out for the Gendros junior side, a local Swansea team.

‘I was playing for Newport County when John was on the groundstaff at Swansea,’ says Harold Williams, a winger who would join up with Charles at Leeds United. ‘Joe Sykes, who was a close friend of mine, would talk to me about him. He’d say, “Harold, this fella is going to be a great player. What a fantastic player he’s going to be.” I thought to myself, “I don’t know about that” because John was a bit slow then. But I’ve never forgotten Joe saying those things and he was proved right. The funny thing about it was that Frank Barson, who was also a coach at the Vetch, never mentioned John to me.’

Sykes also enthused about the teenager to Paul, Swansea’s captain. ‘This lad is going to be great. He’s got the lot – strength, heading ability, ball control, timing and body balance.’ After such a glowing appraisal, Paul was keen to watch the youngster in action. He was not impressed, however, believing Charles looked ‘too nice a lad to come

into the hurly-burly of league football’. According to Paul, a former coal miner from the Rhondda, he was ‘too dainty’ and ‘afraid to go in resolutely and use his strength’. His scathing verdict was, ‘Plays like an amateur’. When Leeds eventually snatched him away in 1948, Paul did not notice the youngster had gone. Paul later admitted he was ashamed of his first assessment of the player who, arguably, became the finest all-round footballer the world has ever seen.

For all Sykes’s talk, Charles was nowhere near the first team. ‘The trouble at Swansea when we were on the groundstaff was that they had 40 bloody professionals on the books,’ explains Henning. ‘There were three players for every position and we apprentices just weren’t going to get a game. We stood a better chance of playing by going to another club. The older players were on contracts so the manager would play them.’

This was Charles’s situation at the Vetch when Jack Pickard first saw him on a hot August afternoon in 1948, playing in a kickabout game at Cwmbwrla Park. Pickard was Leeds United’s part-time scout in South Wales. Born and bred in Leeds, the divorcee had moved to Swansea before the First World War to take photographs of the Mumbles and the Gower, which he sold to the public. He remarried and settled in the town before being made manager of the Willerby & Co. men’s outfitters shop on the High Street.

Pickard had never enjoyed a career in the game. He played centre-half for Armley Church School in Leeds and had trials with the now-defunct Leeds City. He served in the First World War and lost the sight in his left eye in 1916 while on duty in Brownstown, Northern Ireland, ending any chance of him becoming a professional footballer once the war ended.

Billy Hampson, who was appointed Leeds manager in 1935, gave Pickard the job of unearthing young talent in the South Wales area and sending it up to West Yorkshire. As a

scout he preferred a low-key approach and the parks of wet and windswept mining villages were his favourite hunting grounds. Not all Pickard's recommendations were taken on. He had told the Yorkshire club to sign Roy Paul and Trevor Ford but his advice fell on deaf ears. Both players went on to become big stars in the First Division, Paul with Manchester City and Ford with Aston Villa and Sunderland.

When Pickard spotted Charles, he was working for a new manager, Major Frank Buckley, the Boer War veteran and one of the most famous names in English football. In 1939, Buckley took Wolverhampton Wanderers to the FA Cup final where they were surprisingly beaten by Second Division Portsmouth. Twice he came close to bringing the First Division championship to Molineux. In 1938 his side was pipped to the post by Arsenal. The following year, they were beaten by Everton.

Pickard's first glimpse of Charles was serendipitous. After locking up at Willerby's, he and his wife, Blodwen, made their way to Cwmbwrla Park to watch a Swansea League fixture between St Joseph's and the Nickel Works. As they strolled through the park, Pickard noticed a group of boys playing with a light rubber ball behind the goalposts.

'Among the bigger lads was one who dominated the scene,' recalled Pickard, who died in 1983. 'He seemed to be everywhere the ball went and always able to do something out of the ordinary with it. Even to me, after watching so many footballers in my time, it seemed uncanny, for the ball seemed to be glued to his feet. I asked my wife to carry on to see the game and said I would join her in a few minutes. I couldn't take my eyes off this boy. She suggested I was wasting my time and that I would miss the game I had gone to see.'

Pickard stayed and asked a bystander who the 'gaunt-looking boy who's bossing this lot with the ball' was. 'He's young Charlo,' came the reply. 'He's here nearly every day. I believe he's on Swansea Town's groundstaff.' Pickard stayed

a few more minutes before joining his wife to watch the Swansea League game, believing Charles – who ‘was like a general preparing for battle’ – was out of his reach.

Pickard returned to his home in William Street, opposite the Vetch, and told his son, Charles, of his discovery. Charles Pickard recalls, ‘I remember Dad telling me quietly, “I’ve just seen this boy playing in Cwmbwrla Park. He’s beyond. He’s got everything.” He went to watch John in the park a couple of times.’

The scout was captivated by what he had seen. He later told a newspaper that he felt ‘as excited as a fight manager who knows he has found a world heavyweight champion’. He added, ‘I couldn’t sleep at night. I lay awake systematically going over his footballing strong points. I tried hard to find a fault in his make-up. The only possible snag I could think of was that he was rather weaker on the left side than the right but even that shortcoming seemed to be more than compensated for by all his other qualities. It also occurred to me that he was rather gaunt. I couldn’t be sure that he was naturally inclined that way or if he was just in the process of growing quickly.’

Pickard was more critical of the teenager in his handwritten memoirs. Charles ‘gave the impression of being lazy, with no ball control, aimlessly booted the ball . . . he was very slow and cumbersome on the turn and lethargic in his movements’. But the good points outweighed the bad. He had the ‘priceless’ gift of two good feet, was cool and confident, and also ‘looked likely to grow and be of a powerful build’.

Pickard assumed Charles was Swansea Town’s property and there was no way he could send him up to Leeds for Major Buckley to take a look at him. One day, however, Ned Charles came to see Pickard at Willerby’s. Ned was frustrated by his son’s lack of progress at Swansea and was considering getting him a job at his steelworks. At the Vetch, John was doing menial jobs, all for twenty-five shillings a

week. Ned felt his son might as well become a labourer in the steelworks. At least he would get more money. Ned told Pickard that with the amount his son was bringing home he was ‘unable to put enough food in the lad’s belly, let alone being able to buy clothes to put on his back’.

Explains Charles Pickard, ‘Ned told my dad that all John was doing at the Vetch was cleaning the stands and picking up rubbish after the matches. He knew Dad had sent players up to Leeds and he asked if he could send John up. Dad said to Ned, “Has John signed anything?” Ned said he hadn’t. “Are you sure, Ned?” He said he was sure. “John isn’t a Swansea Town player – he just works at the ground.”’ Charles was registered at the Vetch as an amateur, on a Welsh League form. This meant any Football League club could poach him since, in the eyes of the Football Association (FA), he was not a Swansea Town player.

Pickard could send the 16 year old he described as a ‘young magician’ to Leeds for a trial.

He rang Buckley and told him, ‘I’m not exaggerating when I say that I have a boy down here in Swansea who has it in him to become a great player. If you miss him you’ll miss the finest proposition in the British Isles. If you feed him on steaks and help him to regain some of the strength he’s lost through growing, he’ll become the greatest footballer in Britain.’

Pickard visited Ned and Lily in Alice Street one Thursday evening to discuss the possibility of their son going to Elland Road for a trial. John was out playing cricket and Mel was dispatched to bring him home. Decades later, John Charles recalled that visit. ‘When Mr Pickard came round to see my parents and mentioned Leeds, my mother said, “John can’t go up to Leeds – he hasn’t got his passport.” That’s how some people thought in Swansea. My mother had never been out of the town.’

Ned was keen for his son to make the 250-mile trip to Yorkshire. So too was John who knew his chances of playing

for The Swans were remote. But Lily was not thrilled at the idea of John moving north. As Ned later explained, ‘My wife was the big stumbling block. Naturally, like any other mother, she had no desire to see her son leave home and Leeds is a long way from Swansea. She said she’d much rather he didn’t go but to avoid a major domestic upset Lily eventually gave John her blessing.’

Before he left the house, Pickard told John, ‘You have it in you to become one of the greatest footballers in Britain. You can play for Wales before you are 20. You have all the ability to make your family proud of you. You can do all these things if you remember this advice – when you report to Leeds listen to all the coaches and say nowt.’

Charles was not the only Swansea groundstaff boy to be having a trial at Leeds. Joining him were his close friends, Henning and Griffiths. ‘The day after Pickard offered him a trial John told us what had happened and suggested we go and see Pickard at the shop because he might be interested in us going up as well,’ says Henning. ‘So all three of us went into Willerby’s and we asked Pickard if we could go to Leeds with John. He said he would arrange for us to go for a trial as well.’

Both clutching a pair of football boots and a small suitcase, Charles and Henning met Pickard at Swansea’s Victoria Station on 18 September 1948. Griffiths, in London playing for Swansea’s Combination side, would join up with his two colleagues in Leeds later that day. Pickard saw the pair safely onto the 6.30 a.m. train to Crewe, where they would change for Leeds City Station, and waved them off. Charles’s remarkable football journey had started.

CHAPTER TWO – BUCKLEY'S BOY

After a draining eight-hour train journey, Charles and Henning made their own way to Elland Road. From there, they were taken to a boarding house on Beeston Hill, about three-quarters of a mile from the ground. This would be their home for the next few weeks.

'It was only a terraced house but apart from us there were four navvies staying there plus the husband and wife who ran the place,' remembers Henning. Later that afternoon they met Harry Griffiths at Leeds City Station. His arrival made the conditions even more cramped. 'The three of us were put into one room. Looking back, I don't know how we all fitted in,' adds the former Swansea Town forward.

The trialists trained with the Leeds United squad every morning and played a number of games for the 'A team'. Recalls Henning, 'We played a team from a mining village in one game and another time we played at Huddersfield.' Major Buckley, now approaching his 66th birthday, would decide if any of them were to be offered contracts with the Second Division club. When he took on young players the Major used a four-point formula – they must be strong, they must love the game, they must be able to play with both feet, and they must have guts. Those not fitting the bill were politely shown the door.

In his first trial match, Charles was picked for the unfamiliar role of right-back. Charles, who had always played at left-half, was stunned when he learned of the news. This was Buckley's way. He wanted to see how players performed in different positions and in Charles's case, he wanted to see if he had a right foot. By the time

Buckley left Elland Road in 1953, Charles had played in five different positions. ‘A genuine footballer,’ the Major declared, ‘should be able to perform successfully in any position on the field.’ Another of his favourite sayings was, ‘I don’t care how good a player is, if he can only kick with one foot he’s only half a footballer.’ It would have been interesting to hear the Major’s thoughts on the great Hungarian, Ferenc Puskas, who was all left foot.

Watching Charles that day at Elland Road were Buckley’s right-hand men. They were trainer Bob Roxburgh, the former Newcastle United and Blackburn Rovers right-back, former England captain and Leeds manager Willis Edwards, who was in charge of the reserves, and former England wing-half Ken Willingham, who was helping with coaching duties at Elland Road.

Charles got off to the worst possible start. In the opening minutes of the game the ball came to him and he lunged forward to volley it clear but missed completely. Because of that lapse, his game could have disintegrated altogether, but Charles quickly settled down and impressed the trio of coaches who were convinced his early blunder was simply a case of stage fright. Buckley also took a look at Charles during his trial period. He kept his views private but inside he shared Jack Pickard’s excitement. ‘By Jove,’ thought Buckley when he first saw the Welsh boy play. ‘A natural two-footer who does the simple things easily and the difficult things even more easily.’

After two weeks, decision day arrived for Charles, Henning and Griffiths. They were summoned to Major Buckley’s office and one by one they learned their fate. ‘I remember we were called to the Major’s office on a Wednesday evening,’ says Henning. ‘We went in one at a time. I was first and he said, “I don’t need you at the moment. I’ll send for you if I do.” Then Harry went in and he said the same thing to him. John went in last and when he came out he said, “I’ve got to come back up Friday.” That was it. They wanted John. We all

went back to Swansea together that night but John returned to Leeds on the Friday. Harry and I did quite well but obviously not well enough. Anyway, I was so homesick I was glad to come home, so was Harry. John didn't have that problem though.'

Charles Pickard, who worked as a bus driver in Swansea, was in his native Leeds when the Major made his decision. His father had asked him to pay the Leeds manager a visit to ask him what he thought of the three players he had sent up. 'I'll always remember what Buckley said to me. "I'm keeping this boy called John Charles. If ever I've seen a winner he's the one." I asked him about Bobby and Harry. He said, "Those two are more content to go into the billiard room and play snooker."' Charles Pickard played with Griffiths in a local team, The Ysgolians, and did not agree with the Major's assessment. 'I said to him, "I tell you Mr Buckley, Harry Griffiths will play for Wales." And he did,' smiles Pickard. Griffiths would win his one and only Welsh cap in April 1953, in a 3–2 win over Northern Ireland in Belfast.

The two 'rejects' were eventually both taken on by Swansea Town. Henning played ten times from 1955–57 but Griffiths would have a far better career, making 422 appearances for The Swans from 1949–64 and briefly managing the club in the mid-1970s. He became assistant to John Toshack when he was made manager but died tragically at the age of 47 when he collapsed in the Vetch treatment room from a heart attack before a league game in April 1978.

As for Charles, Buckley took to him the very first time they met, when the diffident teenager was ushered into his office for an interview. Buckley ran the football club like an Army battalion and detested bad manners. Players who smoked or stood with their hands in their pockets in his presence were thrown out of his office. But Charles did all the right things. Like a soldier waiting for inspection, straight-backed with

arms at his sides, he stood in front of Buckley, who was sitting at his desk, and he waited until he was spoken to. Recalling his first impression of Charles, the late Buckley said, ‘I was confronted by an Adonis of a youth. I liked his bearing and his respectful approach. Somehow, he looked like a footballer. He looked like a fine, upstanding young man but he was far too shy and modest to say much about himself.’

Buckley offered Charles a place on the groundstaff, found him digs and, noticing Charles was growing out of his suit, ordered him to report to a tailor for a new one to be paid for by Buckley. Had Leeds turned Charles away, Jack Pickard had a contingency plan for the teenager. Believing he would ‘give a good account of himself in the boxing ring’, Pickard would have contacted either Johnny Best, one of the country’s leading fight promoters, or the British heavyweight champion, Bruce Woodcock, suggesting they should take on and train this ‘powerful, tough, young man’. They were telephone calls he never had to make.

At Elland Road, Charles was financially better off since Leeds were paying him three pounds and ten shillings a week. He was doing the same jobs as he was doing at the Vetch, such as sweeping the stands and doing odd jobs, but the big difference was that Charles knew he had a far better chance of playing first-team football with his new club. Buckley had a reputation for throwing young players into league action. At his former club, Wolves, he had made Stan Cullis captain when the centre-half was only 19 and also gave wingers Jimmy Mullen and Alan Steen their senior debuts at the tender age of 16.

Charles also had the comfort of knowing Buckley rated him highly. On one particular day, when the Leeds manager was talking to a local journalist, Phil Brown of the *Yorkshire Evening News,* he spotted Charles and another groundstaff boy, Grenville Hair, sweeping the Elland Road stands. He summoned them over. ‘Come here you two!’ Then he