



Back as a fan

CHRIS Morris's retirement reduces to six the number of Lennie Lawrence's signings still at the club. Although Morris would never claim to have been the crowd's favourite – defenders rarely are – he was a useful and by all accounts popular player with his fellow professionals.

Chris Morris was born in Cornwall on Christmas Eve 1963, and was brought up in the area, playing football for England Schools. Although, like most lads he harboured ambitions to play professionally, he did not expect it to happen: "I was six weeks away from starting a PE teacher training course when I was invited to have a trial with Sheffield Wednesday. They offered me a one year contract, and I had to decide whether to take it or go for some more long term security with the teacher training course."

The then 20 year old Morris signed for Wednesday and unwittingly made his first Boro connection, because the Wednesday manager who signed him was Jack Charlton, in his final year as manager at Hillsborough. Chris spent five years at Wednesday, playing alongside the likes of Gary Megson and Gary Bannister, but had not yet found his niche as a defender with an international future: "In those early days I was a bit part player, I didn't go straight into the first team, and probably played less than 100 first team games in the five years that I was there."

The need to become established and settled was beginning to make itself apparent when Celtic made an offer for him: "I'd had four seasons under Howard Wilkinson after Jack (Charlton) left, and had come to the end of my contract. Wednesday offered me a reasonable new deal, but to be honest I was ready for a move. You can become part of the furniture if you're not careful, especially if you are a utility player. I wanted to establish myself, and I don't think that the opportunities to do that are as good unless a club pays money for you. Celtic made a concrete offer so I flew up to see Billy McNeil and signed the same day."

You could be forgiven for thinking that moving from the breathtaking time capsule of rural Cornwall to the industrial heartland of Sheffield would be enough of a culture shock to last a lifetime – so did Morris have to do a lot of soul searching before deciding to move on to Glasgow? "Not at all, it was a really easy decision. It wasn't a case of just wanting to move to any club, because I had been made other offers; but when Celtic came in I knew it was the right one for me. When I had a look around the old Celtic Park (this was before the big refit) I got a really good feel for the place and was delighted to sign for them" (*Uncannily, this is almost exactly word for word what Tony Mowbray said to me when I spoke to him about his move to Celtic in mss 110*). "My Irish connections (Morris's mothers side of the family are all Irish) helped me settle really quickly because the crowd took to me straight away, and were fabulous to me. It was a refreshing change from Sheffield where at times I was the whipping boy."

Chris spent the next five years establishing himself as a

defender of commitment and quality. An ever present in the first team, he twice won Scottish League Championship and Cup medals, and played for the Republic of Ireland in the European Championship finals under his old mentor Jack Charlton. In his autobiography Charlton says of Morris: "Chris had plenty of pace and was brilliant at getting to the dead-ball line. There were more enquiries from Europeans about Morris after the finals than for any other Irish player. He was an exceptionally gifted full back"

However, the arrival of Liam Brady as Celtic manager heralded a new challenge for Morris, now approaching 30 years old: "Liam was trying to develop youngsters and had a couple that he thought could take my place. However, I had just signed a two year contract when Lennie Lawrence came in for me. I played for Celtic in Tony Mowbray's testimonial,



CHRIS MORRIS – who retired from the Boro during the summer

which was my first visit to Middlesbrough. I thought at the time 'this is a really good team' and the crowd created a great occasion for Tony and a brilliant atmosphere. Anyway, a matter of weeks later Lennie came in for me and he and the club in general really impressed me. Boro had just been promoted to the Premier League and Lawrence, Keith Lamb and Colin Henderson were confident that Boro were going to stay up; relegation was not even in the vocabulary, and I really wanted to be a part of it"

Chris was an integral part of Boro's 94-95 Endsleigh League Championship team and made a total of 104 appearances for the club before his knee injury forced him to retire during the summer at the age of 33. However, his connections with Middlesbrough will remain solid.

He and his partner Alison are staying on Teesside, and along with their four children are now season ticket holders at the Riverside. Chris and Alison also have business interests in the area, including a portfolio of properties for rent and "the principles of interactive distribution" (answers on a postcard please, although I suspect it is

something to do with the type of high profile multi-level retailing, which is metaphorically connected to triangular based middle eastern architecture). (*EH? Ed*).

Now that Chris is a Boro fan, he feels even more for the players when the crowd at the Riverside get on the players backs: "If the crowds get at you, it can just cripple your game, so it does more harm than good. Also, it lifts the opposition, so that teams will soon learn that they only have to come to Riverside and frustrate the Boro by playing tight for the first twenty minutes, because the crowd will then get on the Boro players backs. They can then take the game as Boro collapse under all the pressure. The fans must show patience. All of us, the players and the fans, want the team to win, but if things are not going right, then that's the time that the players really need to know that the crowd is behind them; it makes such a difference, especially at Riverside because with such a small number of away fans it should be a fortress like Anfield or Old Trafford."

He's right of course, but what's the odds that by the end of the season he'll have leapt from his seat at the Riverside at least a dozen times shouting something like "Boro, you're shit!!"

Keogh's Korker:

Who are the six players Lennie Lawrence signed who are still at the Boro? Answer at bottom of the page

FACTFILE

RIO FERDINAND

Born: Peckham, Nov 7, 1978.
1980: discovered by scout playing for Blackheath Bluecoats.
1983: comes close to signing Middlesbrough. Also offered chance of place at Lilleshall. Chooses West Ham instead.
1995: signs professional in November.

■ When I spoke to Chris Morris recently, (see left) he was full of praise for Dave Geddis, Kenny Wharton and Ron Bone who apparently "do a brilliant job of developing the Boro youngsters" It is generally well known that the Boro have always been at the forefront of youth grooming and development. If the *Daily Mail* is correct, they spotted Rio Ferdinand at the tender age of five, but huh! Typical Boro! they let him go. Apparently he demanded a creche. They said if you carry on drinking alco-pops like that son, your career may well do just that in a few years time.

Paul Thompson became Boro record signing when a tribunal the fee for his recent move from Gateshead.

The striker cost £15,000, with two further £2,000 payments when he makes a set number appearances. Gateshead had wanted £50,000 for Tom...

■ So, it seems that Bryan Robson, overwhelmed with the success of mss has started signing up it's star writers-cum-snappers. I have heard from an authoritative source that an offer in the region of £20,000 is about to be put forward for Harry Pearson. The intention is for him to double for Nigel Pearson on the pitch, thus allowing Nige to continue work on his masterplan to be Boro manager by the year 2000. (And you read it here first). As for me, I understand the offer is going to be a lucrative cash plus player deal. Well, to be exact, £5 and a packet of 20 Players...