

MORTIMORE

Tribute to
a class act

John Mortimore had ambitions to be a school teacher but his football talent saw him plucked from the amateur game by Chelsea. He spent nine happy years at the Bridge before embarking on a successful coaching career that included two title-winning spells at Benfica, where he is still revered to this day by the club's supporters



Benfica's players chair John Mortimore off the pitch after he won the cup and sealed the Double in his last game as manager
Image credit: Jornal O Benfica



On the Boundary estate in Bedford, in the mid-late 1970s, there were two young lads who could each lay claim to an uncle with one of the coolest jobs in the world.

Vernon Brown, a promising young footballer in a rugby-mad town, was very proud of the fact that his uncle Jimmy had been the manager of Benfica, the celebrated Portuguese side who were the second team to win the European Cup in the early 1960s and the club where the world-famous Eusebio had made his name.

When Vernon told one of the lads who lived across the road – another talented footballer called Steve Mortimore – about his globetrotting footballing relative, he was surprised at the response he got. In fact, Steve retorted, it was *his* uncle John that was actually the manager of Benfica – and he was adamant about that.

Vernon went about the next few years of his life wondering if Steve was telling tall stories. Well, you would, wouldn't you? But, no, it turned out to be true. In 1976, as Vernon's uncle, the great Jimmy Hagan, took a new role as manager of Sporting Lisbon, another Englishman was settling in across the city at the club where he had won three straight titles a few years earlier. John Mortimore – Chelsea stalwart and uncle to Vernon's mate Steve – was the new manager of Benfica.

What Steve and Vernon did not know was that Mortimore had grown up idolising Hagan, who had played in Aldershot during the Second World War, when he was billeted in the barracks town just down the road from Mortimore's home in Farnborough.

"I watched him play an Army Cup final and he became my hero," recalled the younger man. "One of those guys that a boy watches play and he is a great character – he scores goals and works hard.

"I remember taking the afternoon off school to watch him play and when I went back to school the next morning, those boys who had been to the final had to bend over for six of the best! It was worth it, though. It was worth six of the best to see Jimmy Hagan play."

More than 30 years later, Mortimore and Hagan would become friends when they found themselves coaching two of Portugal's biggest clubs,

Benfica and Sporting Lisbon, in the late 1970s.

Mortimore's long and varied football journey was full of colour and character. The 279 appearances and 10 goals he registered as a big centre-half for Chelsea in the 1950s and '60s only tell a fraction of the tale that took him from the English south coast to southern Africa; from Athens to Andalusia; from west London to the westernmost tip of Europe.

It's fair to say he had a rather different life mapped out for himself when he left school, completed his national service and began training to be a teacher in the early-mid 1950s. At that point, he was playing as an amateur for Woking, while he studied to teach PE or technical drawing for a living. However, his plans were forever altered when he received a call from the manager's office at Stamford Bridge in April 1956.

As his wife Mary remembers it, Chelsea first got in contact when they were stuck for a player in the half-back line, and Ted Drake had heard positive things about this towering presence in the Isthmian League. Mortimore made his Blues debut that same month, before going on to make a further two appearances the following season as cover, while continuing to play non-league football for Woking.

At that time, it was possible to simultaneously represent a club in the amateur game and turn out for another team in the professional

leagues, so long as you didn't sign professional forms, which he eventually did in August 1957, after being capped a handful of times as an England amateur international the previous season.

Not everyone was delighted with Mortimore's decision to turn professional at that point. In an obituary published in Woking's matchday programme, Mark Doyle explained that John's brother Charlie "pleaded with [him] to stay at Woking for one more season".

Charlie was the Isthmian League side's captain and was convinced that the Cardinals had a great chance of reaching the following season's FA Amateur Cup final, which proved to be an accurate hunch as Woking did indeed go on to win the trophy in 1958. Charlie had hoped to take the field at Wembley alongside his brother, but in truth the opportunity to become a professional footballer with a club that had recently been champions of England was too good for John to turn down.

Mortimore was initially a part-time pro at Chelsea, as Drake gave him permission to continue studying for his teaching degree, which he completed. He maintained that educative nature even as he set out upon a career in football and he took his coaching badges while still playing.

Early in his time at the club, he earned himself an unusual nickname when he surprised his team-mates by producing a purse from his pocket to get out

Mortimore (left) with his brother Charlie in their Woking days
Image credit: Mark Doyle, *The Cardinal Tales*





Mortimore made 279 appearances for Chelsea between 1956 and 1965

some money. He wasn't allowed to forget what amounted to an act of arch eccentricity in a 1950s changing room, and from that moment onwards, he was 'Purse' or 'Pursey' to his Chelsea mates.

Drake had earmarked Mortimore as the man to replace the departed Ken Armstrong at right-half, where he had been selected for his three appearances as an amateur, but he was subsequently more often selected as a centre-half.

Described variously as a 'strongman' and a 'rugged Horatio' by reporters, it was clear that one of his key strengths was, well, his strength, particularly in the air. He was a sensible head and a well-respected figure in the dressing room, so it was no surprise when he was occasionally chosen to captain the side during his time here. He also got his first taste of continental football when he played in our first venture into European competition in the 1958/59 Fairs Cup.

By the time Tommy Docherty took over as manager following Drake's departure, the team needed reviving. We were relegated in 1962 and the Doc decided it was time to rebuild around youth, which seemed a sensible idea when you consider the likes of Peter Bonetti, Terry Venables, Barry Bridges and Bobby Tambling were among a fleet of emerging talents at Chelsea, with legends in the making like Ron Harris, John Hollins and Peter Osgood not far behind.

Mortimore, however, was not one of those sacrificed in favour of young



The more senior pros all took the youngsters under our wings



John Mortimore

legs, as Docherty considered him to be one of the wise old heads that would be crucial in setting the right example and bringing the best out of the next generation.

"There was a real attraction to the club to youngsters because they knew they'd get an opportunity, whereas that wasn't always the case elsewhere," Mortimore told the matchday programme years later. "The more senior pros all took the youngsters under our wings and I think they enjoyed it... but so did we. Being an ex-schoolmaster, it was a great pleasure to help them out."

It wasn't long before he took the logical next step and began to look for coaching opportunities during the close season. On one occasion, he and his Chelsea team-mate Frank

Blunstone accepted an invitation to coach in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the two players decided to take their families with them, all expenses paid, in lieu of payment for the job.

It was his first experience of working abroad, as he coached teams from schools, colleges, works, even a coal mine. He worked with players from all social and racial backgrounds and travelled across a land that, but for football, he and his family may never have had the opportunity to see.

In the summer of 1964, Mortimore stayed behind at the end of Chelsea's tour to the Caribbean, and spent five weeks coaching there as well, before returning to London for the new season, which turned out to be his last at Stamford Bridge.

Midway through the 1964/65 campaign, with the Blues challenging for silverware on three fronts, Mortimore was appointed player-coach by Docherty, following the departure of his assistant Dave Sexton to take the manager's role at Orient. By now, he had half an eye on this new phase of his career, but he was still an important player in that promising young side.

He had the ball in the net midway through the first half of our FA Cup semi-final against Liverpool at Villa Park in March 1965, after rising highest to convert a Bert Murray corner, but the referee ruled that he had fouled the goalkeeper.

"It was a refereeing mistake, or at least I thought so!" he told us in a programme interview years later. "But we just had to get on with it. All of us thought it was a good goal and even a couple of their lads agreed, but it wasn't to be."

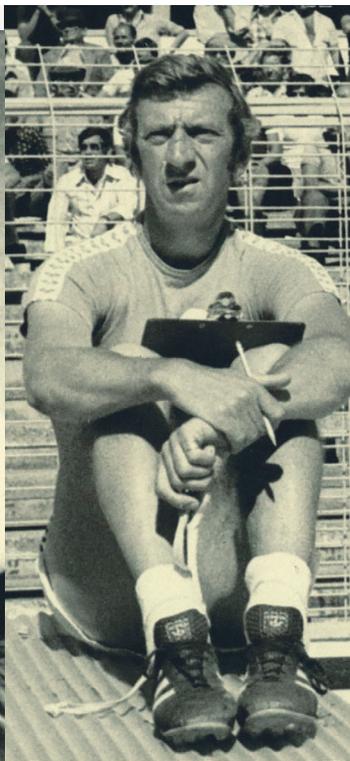
In the end we were beaten by two second-half Liverpool goals as our outside hopes of a domestic Treble foundered. We lost top spot in the league soon afterwards, and our title charge came to a grinding halt amid the scandal of the 'Blackpool Incident' that saw several of the younger players sent home from an away trip after a night out against the commands of Docherty. Despite those disappointments, Mortimore ended the campaign with his first professional silverware, as we beat Leicester City in a two-legged League Cup final.

At the start of the next season, he ended his nine-year association with Chelsea and moved to nearby QPR as player-coach. He only played a handful more games, though, as his focus began to turn to the next chapter of his career. In March 1966, he headed north to join Sunderland as coach, expanding his horizons and adding to his experience on the training field. It was during his time at Roker Park that he was awarded a testimonial game by Chelsea, and he returned to Stamford Bridge to play against a London XI.

In 1968, Southampton appointed him assistant manager, for which the job

Mortimore, described as a 'rugged Horatio' of a centre-half, heads the ball clear in Chelsea's 1965 League Cup final win against Leicester





Far left: Mortimore in the dugout at Benfica, who he led to two league titles and two Portuguese Cup triumphs
Image credit: Jornal O Benfica

Near left: Enjoying the football and the Lisbon sun during his time at Benfica
Image credit: Jornal O Benfica

description included “the coaching, training and discipline of the players”. Mortimore was still only 33, but his coaching career was already well and truly underway as he combined his experiences as a teacher and a footballer to great effect. He overcame the initial resistance among the players to what they feared would be a ‘clipboard man’, coming in to take away their freedom, and earned a nice-guy tag instead, while their defence became tighter under his tactical guidance.

According to Saints historian David Bull, the club’s directors had countered opposition to Mortimore’s role by describing it as a “sort of European thing”. When he left the Dell in 1971, he went in search of the real thing and headed for the continent.

By now, he was ready to be the boss, and his first managerial role was at Greek top-flight side Ethnikos, whose home stadium in Piraeus was the same one in which Chelsea had won the Cup Winners’ Cup a couple of months before Mortimore took the job.

“At that time, European clubs were beginning to contact the FA and ask for English coaches,” Mary explains. “It’s sort of the other way around now, but back then they wanted our experience and coaches, so they would ask the FA to recommend somebody. I think John must have made it known at the FA that he was interested, and that’s how it came to be.”



He really loved Portuguese life. The food, the people – everything



Mary Mortimore

Mortimore led Ethnikos to an eighth-place finish, but they were far from the biggest ticket in town back then. Nearby Panathinaikos had a much bigger budget and were managed by Real Madrid and Hungary legend Ferenc Puskas, while Olympiacos were the big draw in Piraeus, ensuring that Mortimore was able to work in less pressured circumstances than the men in the hot seat for the traditional Athenian footballing giants.

A job like that was never likely to bring silverware, but it gave him a taste for management and showed that he was willing to travel far and wide to take on a challenge. The following season he returned briefly to Hampshire, where he worked as Portsmouth manager, alongside his former Chelsea team-mate Ron



Addressing his Benfica squad in July 1985, with Portugal legend Eusebio stood facing the camera on the far right
Image credit: Jornal O Benfica

Tindall, who was general manager at Fratton Park at the time. However, it was Mortimore's next destination that provided the highlights of his coaching career.

In 1976, he was offered the chance to take the reins at Benfica, one of the biggest clubs in Europe.

"I jumped at the opportunity," he told me in an interview in 2014, and so began a love affair with the Lisbon club where he enjoyed enormous success over the course of two spells as manager.

The Mortimores quickly settled into life in Portugal. Mary took a job teaching in the city's British Embassy school, St Julian's, and John fell in love with the place.

"He really loved Portuguese life," she recalls. "Portuguese food, Portuguese people – everything about Portugal. He absolutely loved it, and I did too, but I wasn't quite so embedded in it as John was."

Any teacher knows the importance of clear communication and when Benfica travelled to Brazil and Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa early in his tenure, Mortimore quickly discovered the importance of this global language.

"I had an interpreter to start with," he explained, "a very nice chap, who was very helpful and very popular among the players, and I said to myself, 'John, you've got to learn this language.'"

"So I did a crash course to learn Portuguese and it was a great help because, although I kept my

interpreter going, I found myself learning the language very quickly. It was a necessity really. After training, there would be press there wanting to know things and I would handle that easily enough. It was just the right thing to do."

Mortimore had a great eye for potential in young players and he introduced several of them from the youth ranks to the Benfica first team, many of whom went on to become internationals.

"I watched the youth team a couple of times, which was always my natural inclination because I'm an ex-PE teacher," he explained. "I saw one or two players in the juniors who I thought were better than what I'd got in the first team, so I decided I was going to pinch them and I got them playing in the first team after about half a dozen games. What can I say? You see something in them and you stick by it."

Benfica won the league title with nine points to spare in his first season at the helm, in 1976/77, and the players he introduced to the team went from strength to strength for club and country. The following two seasons, they were runners-up and he left the club after three years, returning to the coaching staff at Southampton. However, the mutual admiration between him and Benfica was strong and Mortimore came back to Lisbon for a second spell at the Estadio da Luz in 1985.

By that point, a strong Porto side had knocked the Eagles off their perch, but



he got to work and proved to be even more of a success this time around.

Among his coaching staff was Eusebio – Benfica’s greatest player of all time and the Golden Boot winner in the 1966 World Cup. Mortimore knew just what to do with a retired striker of such quality.

“If I wanted anybody to train with the goalkeepers, I’d let Eusebio do it because he was the best kicker I had ever come across. He used to love taking the goalkeepers for training because it meant he was shooting at goal all the time!

“Eusebio was a tremendous guy. He was from Mozambique and I had been down in the southern part of Africa coaching, so we had a sort of link there. We became very good friends – he was a great player, but also a great person. I used to leave him to take the Under-18s for matches – his football reflected his personality and he was not a conceited fellow at all.”

Mortimore’s second Benfica side won the cup in his first season, then followed it up with a sensational league and cup Double in 1986/87. If you were in any doubt as to how big an achievement that was, you only have to consider that Benfica’s vanquished rivals Porto won the European Cup that year.

Mortimore left Benfica on a high that summer and moved inland across the Iberian peninsula to Spain, where he took over at Real Betis. As had been the case in both Greece and Portugal before, he was one of several British

coaches working in La Liga, where Terry Venables had just lost his job at Barcelona despite finishing second. Howard Kendall took over at Athletic Bilbao at the same time as Mortimore arrived in Andalusia, while John Toshack was enjoying a prolonged spell at Real Sociedad.

It proved to be a tough year. Real Betis had finished eighth the previous season, but Mortimore was unable to sustain their top-half place and they ended up narrowly avoiding relegation in his only campaign at the helm.

Meanwhile, his former Benfica charges reached the European Cup final that year, only to be beaten by a PSV side coached by none other than Guus Hiddink. Unsurprisingly, considering the part he played in a memorable era for the club, Mortimore remains a hero to the red half of Lisbon.

“There is a characteristic about the club that they keep in touch with their ex-players and coaches,” he said in 2014. “There is a man there now who was there as a player with me – a lad named Sheu – and he does a lot of the hosting now. I went out to Portugal with my wife and daughter and they have a museum now with quite a young-looking John Mortimore in it! I was looking through the museum and Sheu came up to me and welcomed me back.”

His reputation in Portugal extends beyond the corridors of Benfica too. In recent years, his name has been attached to a walking football

Top left: Eusebio was part of Mortimore’s coaching team at Benfica

Top right: Mortimore took over at Real Betis after leaving Benfica for a second time in 1987. He is also pictured, inset, speaking to sporting director Luis del Sol at Real Betis’ Estadio Benito Villamarín
Images credit: Real Betis Archive



Left: Mortimore receives the acclaim of Chelsea and Benfica fans alike on the pitch at Stamford Bridge in 2012

Bottom left: Pointing himself out on the roll of honour in the Benfica museum

tournament in the Algarve whose organisers were inspired by his story. The John Mortimore Trophy was first played in 2015, between a team of players from Olhão in Portugal, and a travelling squad from Mortimore's birthplace, Farnborough. Since then, Benfica have hosted the tournament themselves, entering their own side, which fittingly won the trophy.

Mortimore was admired and respected throughout the footballing world, and following the news of his death last month, his former clubs were keen to pay tribute to him and his legacy in the game. Chelsea's players wore black armbands for our game against Burnley and Southampton's

players did likewise for their match over the same weekend, while Benfica's next fixture was preceded by a minute's silence.

"As a family, we were amazed," said Mary. "I mean, truly astonished. The football world did him proud.

"He would have been slightly embarrassed – more than slightly embarrassed – and wondered what all the fuss was about, I think, because as far as he was concerned, he did a job he loved, and he did it to the best of his ability."

Those abilities led him to success as a player at Chelsea and as a coach at Benfica, and his achievements were not forgotten by either club. When his two former teams met in the Champions League quarter-final in 2012, Mortimore was our guest of honour at Stamford Bridge, and at half-time he walked out onto the pitch to rapturous applause from both sets of supporters. The emotion of the occasion rose to the surface when he recalled that moment two years later.

"You're almost bringing tears to my eyes!" he said, with a catch in his voice. "It was such an experience and there is nothing else like it, I don't know how you can make any comparisons. To walk from one penalty area to the other, when there were supporters of both, and be welcomed right the way round... I haven't got words to describe it. It was just a great, great experience."



Words // Dominic Bliss