

JIMMY ARMFIELD: A TRIBUTE BY RT REV. GEOFF PEARSON

Obituaries about Jimmy Armfield in the national media have focused on his achievements as a soccer legend; an important part of his life but only a part.

He moved to Blackpool at the age of seven and lived the rest of his life in the town that already has a bronze statue in his honour. He spent his whole career at Blackpool Football Club playing with the great Stanley Matthews.

Captain of England 15 times, after the 1962 World Cup he was recognised as the best right back in the world. Injury kept him out of the 1966 England World Cup team although he was an important squad member.

There are many 'what ifs' in Jimmy's story. What if he had gone to Manchester United who gave up trying to sign him just before the Munich air crash? What if he'd not got injured in the lead up to the World Cup in 1966?

What if Leeds, a team he managed, had got the rub of the green in the European Cup Final? But Jimmy never did 'what ifs'.

After the storm of Brian Clough's brief managerial reign at Leeds United, Jimmy was brought in to calm the situation. One unusual way he used to lift the players was to put on a pantomime which he wrote and organised.

Journalist and broadcaster, Jimmy was also the Football Association Kingmaker responsible for helping to appoint Terry Venables and Glen Hoddle.

In a book 'Saturday, 3pm - 50 eternal delights of Modern Football' by Daniel Gray there is a whole chapter headed 'Jimmy Armfield's Voice'.

Gray writes: "His regular tone is soft but serious, a measured grandad explaining why stealing is wrong. Volume rises to express annoyance at a cynical foul (Armfield did have one booking late in his career!) or glee at a wave of attacking play from a team chasing a goal. His is a blurring brogue which resonates with depth and honesty, where so much else now is sensation and surface."

Jimmy was appointed OBE in 2000 and CBE in 2010. He served as High Sheriff of Lancashire in 2005, his shield hanging in Lancaster Castle has an obvious tangerine tone.

Meanwhile this well-lived life was being nurtured at St Peter's, Blackpool (recently designated the most deprived parish in the CofE).

Jimmy took on the treasurer's post as well as being organist and choirmaster for 30 years. The Diocese of Blackburn made him a Lay Canon of Blackburn Cathedral in 2001.

Still broadcasting on Radio 5 until quite recently, Jimmy enriched the lives of many across the airwaves, but he also had time for individuals.

I once invited Jimmy to come to speak at a men's breakfast organised in a small rural church. He refused any fee and there he met a young man, new to the Christian faith who had brought his violin.

Jimmy responded to the young man's request for the two of them to play 'Abide With Me'. He waited until all had left then slipped onto the organ seat and played. He then left the man with words of encouragement.

For the past ten years Jimmy has been battling cancer, aided by his wife, Anne, a former nurse and member of Jimmy's choir.

He had two sons, Duncan and John. This humble, kind, avuncular gentleman moved easily between the world of the church and the world of football and served God in any way that he could.

In my time as Bishop of Lancaster I lost count of the number of plaques I saw with Jimmy's name on in institutions spread across Lancashire.

His last few days were spent in Trinity Hospice in Blackpool which he had been instrumental in setting up in the first place.

As he used to say to young footballers: "You've got to think that one day you have to hang your boots up. We all have to finish one day, like we all have to die. You have to prepare for it."

Rt Rev. Geoff Pearson, Retired Bishop of Lancaster; now Honorary Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Liverpool