

WILLIE WATSON INTERVIEW



BY TIM PARKS

WEALDSTONE v DARTFORD
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18 England caps and a shot like Bobby Charlton...meet Willie Watson, a true Wealdstone FC all-time legend



Watson (left) at the 'Willie & George' sporting lunch at Ruislip in 2014. For once Willie takes a back seat as Mr Duck (right) entertains the large crowd

We've an eight-page New Year treat for you in this issue! Tim Parks sits down to interview one of his favourite Stones players in history...

IF THERE'S one little story that sums up the cheeky playfulness of John 'Willie' Watson - the man revered and feared throughout the Stones' first golden era of the 1970s - it's the one about Gibraltar and The Floodlights.

You've not heard it? Well, Wealdstone were winning the Southern League Division One South and the club rewarded Eddie Presland's team with a midweek break in Gibraltar - and a match against First Tower FC, the tiny nation's resident football team.

Willie takes up the story: "The pitch was right next to the airport runway, and at some point the referee said 'There is a plane due in soon, so I'm going to give a long blast on my whistle and the floodlights will go out for a moment so the pilot can land safely. Then we'll resume the game'... well,



Willie (No.4) poised to tackle Hereford in the FA Cup at Lower Mead, 1977

his whistle went with the ball at our end of the pitch, pitch black, and when the lights came on again me and Ray Fulton were up in front of their goal, sticking the ball in the net and falling over laughing. They didn't know what on earth was going on!"

Willie and Ray were the jokers of the team, but chalk and cheese on the pitch with Watson the midfield enforcer and 'Ginger' Fulton the artful wide man. "Has Ray still got his red hair?" I asked Willie.

"Yeah, but now he keeps it in a box by his bed".

Watson's dry humour is the stuff of legend at Wealdstone.

But he earned respect on the pitch by having one of the biggest engines in the game, shrewd tactical awareness, a crunching tackle and a shot like Bobby Charlton.

Although cruelly overlooked at West Ham by manager Ron Greenwood

in his youth - and then, even more strangely being overlooked by the England non-League team in his seven years at Lower Mead - Willie finally reaped the international rewards when he was transferred to Yorkshire top-dogs Scarborough in 1980. His 18 caps for the semi-pro Three Lions, across six years are only bettered by Altrincham full-back John Davison.

Certainly, if playing for your country is a true measure of a footballer's ability, John 'Willie' Watson is in a league of his own among the Wealdstone greats.

You have to be of a certain vintage to have watched and appreciated the man who patrolled the centre of the pitch like a man on a mission, earning the admiration of friend and foe as he protected the back four and worked to provide chance after chance for our celebrated forwards of that time.

Yet it was his fiery temper and will to win that, perversely, stunted his opportunities of making it in the Football League. Willie had a tough upbringing in East London's Stepney Green. "My dad was a boxer. My mum was a cocker spaniel" he joked, making light of the difficult days when his path in life seemed likely to follow his dad, Stephen, into working at the breweries off the Mile End Road, mixed in with a bit of boxing for money in the fairgrounds of Southend.

"Me dad wanted me to do a bit of boxing but I gave it up - I was playing football twice on Saturday for the school and for Senrab, and in goal for a team on Sundays, plus training four nights a week" says Willie.

"I must have had something cos I got

in the East London Boys team and we had some great players there. I was spotted by the well-known scout, Wally St Pier and he came round our house which must have been an eye-opener!

"He invited me to train with West Ham twice a week... but the best thing to come out of that was meeting Ginge Fulton on the tube. He was a Burnt Oak boy, and we met up at Stepney Green and travelled on to training together. It's a friendship that has endured!"

But Willie is rightly scarred by his experience of pro football. His bitterness at his treatment by "The Academy of Football" at Upton Park is long-lasting and understandable.

"I was in West Ham's reserves at the age of 15. One of the youngest-ever. I was in the same team as Trevor Brooking, Harry Redknapp and David Coss, but about 10 years younger. John Lyall was the youth team manager and he rated me. We played Gillingham at Upton Park on my debut and we won 6-0. I was on top of the world.

"I got picked to play for England Youth in the Little World Cup, along with my team mates Kevin Locke and John Ayris, and the next week the West Ham manager made a point in the programme of congratulating the other two... but not me. For some reason I wasn't his cup of tea. Maybe I was a bit of a rascal, too naughty, always getting into scrapes - it was just the way I was brought up. Whatever it was, I was slung out of West Ham."

It was now 1971. John 'Budgie' Byrne, ex West Ham, was manager of Durban City in South Africa and he offered an escape route to 'the serious y p*****d off' Willie Watson.

"It may sound like a strange move but it was great for me. It was real quality football. Johnny Haynes, the ex-England and Fulham skipper was starring in midfield - he could be horrible on the pitch but a real gent off it, a smashing bloke - while the team had four Germans who had been in the World Cup squad a year earlier. Hertha Berlin had been punished for accepting bribes and all their players had to find a game outside FIFA, and South Africa was ideal as they were also outsiders because of apartheid. So Durban City was chock full of internationals, top quality players... and me! It was a real education."

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But after a year Charlton Athletic got in touch. "I had this persuasive letter from them and they convinced me that my future was back in London. So I returned. But I had a 'mare and very soon I was back at home wondering what to do."

His saviours, as it turned out, were a combination of Wealdstone manager Sid Prosser and George Duck.

"Sid was an old friend of Ron Greenwood, and Ron actually did me a bit of a favour when he was slinging me out of West Ham a year earlier. As a parting shot, he said 'You should get in touch with Wealdstone'.

"At the time I thought nothing of it. I'd never even heard of Wealdstone. I just wanted to get away from West Ham. But then Sid kept writing to my old address in Stepney Green, even when I was in South Africa, sending those old blue airmail letters and my mum kept opening them.

"My dad had fixed me up with job at the brewery. I wasn't convinced. But my mum just said "At least this Sid Prosser bloke wants you, that must be worth something."

So I agreed to chat to

Sid, and first off I said 'to be honest, I don't know who you are, or where Wealdstone is. Who else have you got in the team?'

"And then he mentioned George Duck. Now, I'd sort of known George for a few years as he was at Millwall and Spurs, playing the same level and I knew how good he was. So I thought 'well, if this Wealdstone are good enough for him, they can't be bad'.

"I went over to train and it was a good set up, a nice tight ground, good training over the road at Hamilton's and a good feel about it. I'd stayed in touch with Ginge Fulton and when he was released by Orient I got him over too. And Vince O'Kane who was an East London boy like me.

"Well, we had some great years didn't we? I won the Conference in the 80s with Maidstone but that Wealdstone team, that group of players were something else. I'd never enjoyed football as much before or since. Particularly winning the Southern League in '74, the team had such a good balance and flow to it and we knew where the ball was going as if by instinct. The first year after promotion too. I was used

mainly at left back or right back but that season Eddie Presland (another Essex lad who used to give me a lift into training) moved me into midfield for the first time - at Dover, I think it was - and I thought I was terrible. I hardly touched the ball.

"I said to Eddie, 'I ain't done nothing all afternoon!' And he said: 'They ain't done nothing either Willie. That's all part of the game'."

From that moment, Willie Watson grew into the most powerful midfield presence in non-League football. He protected the back four, moved the ball seamlessly through midfield - literally over-powering the opposition - and enjoyed peppering shots on goal at the other end

The Stones' forward stars of that generation - Georgie Duck, Johnny Henderson and Bill Byrne - enjoyed the fruits of his endeavour

as the club built a reputation for fast, attacking football.

But the spiky, combative side of Willie's nature often bubbled to the surface. "It was always there, I'm afraid. I hate losing, whether it's at football or draughts and sometimes I stretched the laws."

His most high-profile moment was in the FA Cup 3rd round at QPR in 1977 when the referee booked Willie for one strong challenge too many - and the irate Watson knocked the card out of his hand!

Today, that would mean a straight red and a lengthy ban. Willie knows how lucky he was, but it could have been even worse. "If you look at the footage of that game, I was actually picking up a lump of mud to throw at the ref when he booked me! I was just so incensed.... the non-League clubs always seem to get the rough end of the stick in those circumstances and the decisions went against us, right through the 90 minutes.

"But we only had ourselves to blame. We had some players who could have hurt Rangers but they went into their shells a bit. We weren't on our game".

I mentioned Steve Brinkman as being an exception.

"Well, Brinky was a showman. A real talent. Ex Arsenal youngster. I was working for Brent Council by then, working in paving and Brinky was my sidekick. I also got jobs there for Nigel Johnson and Seamus Horgan. Very sad though as Brinky and Nigel died very young.... must have been working with me" he said ruefully.

So what was Willie's career outside football up to that point? "Well, before the Brent Council lark I was working in the sausage factory in Acton, Wolseley Sausages. I got the job through Adriaan Eglite, the Stones



A BOWLED OVER! Leighton James fires in Rangers' clinching second goal in the second half after a mesmerising run from Stan Bowles set him up. Bobby Moss (7) and Fred Barwick (6) are the Stones defenders. Left: Willie Watson (bearded) is shown a yellow card by ref Ron Crabb as the game boils over. George Duck (right looks on)

Q.P.R. ready for Blyth
By Norman Dixon
QUEEN'S Park Rangers...
RANGERS...
BLYTH...

Willie's renowned temper boiled over in the FA Cup game at QPR when he knocked the yellow card out of referee Ron Crabb's hand

winger, who was a charge hand there. "

But the ultimate full-time job - playing football - was tantalising still within reach as the 70s wound to a close. With Wealdstone becoming inaugural members of the Football Conference (today's National League), Willie was able to shine on the biggest non-League stage and soon Hull City were sniffing after our mercurial midfielder.... and also the Stones' up-and-coming left back Stuart Pearce.

"Hull! I'm not going to Hull! I said when our daffy manager Ken Payne told me they were interested. I think Wealdstone were interested in the transfer fee. I was 25 and Stuart was 18, and I said 'I'm not going but you go, you might enjoy it'.

"But me and Stuart agreed to travel up there, despite neither really wanting to go, and we arranged to meet at Kings Cross. I turned up and there was no-one there. So I got on the train anyway, all the way wondering what I was doing, and it was like an Ealing Comedy when I got off the train one end and Stuart got off at the other. He'd been on it all the time!

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(Photograph: Bob Thomas)

ENGLAND SEMI-PROFESSIONAL SQUAD 1980

- Back row (left to right): Ian Smith, Brendan Phillips, Bob Stockley, Kenny Hill, Dave Adamson, John Watson, Gordon Simmonite.
Middle row (left to right): Adrian Titcombe (Admin. Officer), Neil Merrick, Brian Parker, Alan Smith (Physio), Dave Clarke, Les Mutrie, Dr. Arthur Tabor (Team Physician).
Front row (left to right): Paul Mayman, John Davison, Terry Casey (Asst. Manager), Tony Jennings (Captain), Keith Wright (Manager), Barry Whitbread, John Denham.

Willie (ringed, back row) with the rest of the England semi-professional side in 1980

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"We met the manager Mike Smith who put us up in digs, and then next day got on the coach for a trial match at Grimsby in pouring rain. Nobody spoke to us on the way down, Nobody. I said to Stu, 'They are no better than us, no way' and when the game started we bossed it, me playing left mid and Pearcey left back and Brian Marwood playing right midfield. Of course they were all over us on the coach going back, but the money wasn't great (they offered #200 a week) and I was adamant I wasn't going. It didn't stop me winding Stuart up, and he nearly signed because I'd told him I WAS going to!"

I remember the Hull fiasco well. I was a sports reporter for the Harrow Observer at the time covering Wealdstone (my dream job) and no sooner had I got to the bottom of the failed bid to land Willie and Stu Pearce than Scarborough - high fliers in the Conference - came in with a £10,500 bid for Watson.

It coincided with the Stones being knocked out of the FA Cup in a replay by Harlow Town. In fact it was no coincidence as the club had been 'robbed' of a cash windfall - the winners of that replay were to face Charlton at home in the First Round - and Chairman Fred Deanus quickly recognised that Willie could be the saviour.

"Fred told me 'You have to leave'. I said 'I don't want to leave'. He said that the club were in financial difficulties and so I said 'Who is it then?' When he said 'Scarborough' I said I wouldn't even want to go there for a holiday.

"Their manager Colin Appleton came down to watch me but he chose a game when I was suspended. We sat next to each other in the stand!"

It was all happening at Lower Mead at that time. Ken Payne was also sacked in the wake of the Cup defeat and it was appointment of new boss Allen Batsford that finally tipped Willie into leaving.

"Allen had a winning reputation but I'd had lots of run-ins with his Wimbledon side in the 70s and his methods weren't for me. I took part in his first training session and it was like a game of tennis with the ball whacked backwards and forwards over the net. Not a lot of subtlety.

"So I went back to Fred and said I'd sign

Batsford buckles down

by
Tim Parks

WEALDSTONE'S new boss Allen Batsford is under no illusions as to his task at Lower Mead.

"The present squad isn't nearly strong enough and there's a lot to be done on the playing side. But it's a lovely set-up here at Lower Mead and I'm looking forward to the challenge," he said after Saturday's match with Worcester.

The former Wimbledon and Hillingdon Boro manager — he steered Wimbledon into the Football League in 1977 after three successive Southern League championship titles — has not yet been put on contract by Wealdstone but that will happen in the next week or so.

In the meantime Batsford will be busy negotiating for new players. "I like my teams to go at people and that just wasn't possible with the players available today," he said.

There was a reassuring word for Wealdstone fans who were worried about a possible confrontation between the new manager and Robin Wainwright — the 'Stones' midfielder star who reportedly left Hillingdon after a disagreement with Batsford.

"It is true that Robin's departure from Hillingdon was partly due to a disagreement over his role in the team.

"I felt that his style of play wasn't compatible to that of the rest of the side. But times change and anyway, Robin and I have always got on as people," said Batsford.

Part of the £10,500 received from Scarborough for the John Watson transfer will be made available to

Batsford for new players, according to chairman Fred Deanus, and signings can be anticipated in the very near future.

But Martin Sperrin, the striker Wealdstone signed on loan from Barnet last month, will not be among them.

The club are currently involved in a wrangle with Barnet boss Barry Fry, who claims that former Wealdstone manager Ken Payne confirmed in writing that 'Stones would be signing Sperrin for £4,000.

But the Wealdstone board say Payne acted "off his own back" by writing to Fry, and that they are under no obligation to sign Sperrin. More about this matter in Friday's Observer.

Meanwhile there will be activity of a very different sort at Lower Mead in the next two weeks, as their new floodlighting system is finally being installed.

Willie's a hit in North

FORMER Wealdstone skipper John "Willie" Watson is already a hit at Scarborough, the club he joined for a record non-League fee ten days ago.

After starring in Scarborough's 3-2 win over Boston United in his debut last week, Watson scored the only goal at Barrow in Saturday's Alliance Premier League match.

It came direct from a 53rd minute corner, and endeared him to the many Scarborough supporters.

He has been described as "the best player on the park in both games" by Scarborough boss Colin Appleton and already seems to be justifying his £10,500 fee.

Watson is still living in Tring, incidentally, and commutes long distance for Scarborough's matches while still training locally.

Harlow Observer, November 1980. Willie is sold to Scarborough and T. Parks reports

for Scarborough if I got a signing-off fee - which he granted. I met Appleton in the Post House Hotel at Luton on the M1 and suddenly I was a Scarborough player!

"They were good to me though. Even though it was a strange start.... I was introduced to the players by their skipper Sean Marshall, who I'd last encountered when I was sent off in the league match at Scarborough a month earlier. I'd nutmegged him by the touchline and he went straight through me - so I elbowed him in the face. But he was nice as pie when we were team mates. He said he'd deserved the elbow for that challenge!

"It's funny how all the on-field shenanigans disappear when you're away from the game. Years after I'd stopped playing I was living in Tring, pushing one of my kids in a pushchair along the High Street in Bekhamsted and suddenly this Italian voice

rings out 'Willie! Willie Watson!' And it was Anniello Iannone, who used to wind me up something rotten when he was playing for Weymouth against Wealdstone. Every game there was a run-in. We used to make jokes about him selling ice-creams and collecting the deckchairs on Weymouth beach.

"Now, years later he was visiting his cousin's Italian restaurant and invited me in. What a chance in a million!"

But back to Scarborough. Willie's time at Seamer Road was blighted by knee injuries and he ended up having arthroscopies (cartilage operations) on both knees.

"I was there for two years until the summer of 1982. The condition for me signing was that I could stay living in Tring, just travelling up for matches and I could hire a car for every game, home and away from a garage round the corner from where I lived. I was still training at Wealdstone to

start off with - until Batsford got the hump, saying I was a distraction. So I trained at Barnet, where Barry Fry was manager, but just played in league games. I was let off Yorkshire Senior Cup matches!"

At the time I remember thinking that Willie would be back to haunt the Stones but he can't remember facing his old club at all - until he signed for Dagenham. But that all came a bit later...

"A new manager came in at Scarborough, Jim McAnearney, and he wasn't happy that I played so few games. But I played more than I should have - squads were much smaller in those days and you just had to play through the pain.... I was suffering from a damaged cartilage at Scarborough for 12 matches but I wasn't going to be labelled a 'Southern Softie' so I just got on with it. Some games I could barely get through the warm-up!"

He was still training at Barnet, who were struggling in the Conference, and clearly coveted by their eccentric manager Fry - who announced one Friday morning in early 1982 that he had signed Willie on loan.

"I told him 'but I can't run - my knees are gone' and he said 'never mind that, you don't need to run - just tell the others they're f*****g useless and gee them up'. His coaching skills weren't the best, he just used to yell at the players, and they were just a mish mash. But somehow were scraped through FA Cup matches against Harlow (the big giant killers at the time) and Wycombe, and found ourselves facing First Division Brighton in the Third Round at Underhill in front of 4,000. It was on telly and we nearly won the game on the boggiest pitch you've ever seen. It finished 0-0 but we lost the replay 3-1. Gary Sargeant scored a cracking goal for Barnet after I'd won the ball in a tackle... only a year later Brighton were back at Wembley playing Man Utd in the FA Cup Final.

"But the funniest thing of all was that we had a decent left back at Barnet, Graham Pearce who wasn't getting games. Barry Fry didn't like Pearce but he stuck him in the team against Brighton to put him in the shop window. Sure enough, he played well and Brighton ended up buying him - and he played in that Cup Final the next year! That was typical Barry Fry".

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Barnet couldn't afford to buy Willie, even with their Cup windfall and eventually Maidstone's chairman Jim Thompson came in with a £6,000 bid to bring him back closer to home.

"Bill Williams had just taken over as manager with Peter Taylor the ex-England winger as player coach. They finished well down the table the previous season but we had a three way battle with Wealdstone and Enfield for the Conference title in 1982-83... and I became a 'penalty king' like The Duck back in the Wealdstone days!"

Willie put away 18 penalties for Maidstone that season, plus four from open play but to this day he doesn't know why he was even taking them!

"We were awarded the first penalty in a pre-season game at Croydon and I was told to take it - maybe because I was the big-money signing - but I'd never taken one before. I actually kicked the floor, just scuffed the ball but the keeper mistimed his dive and the ball went in. It was a rubbish penalty but we got one against Bangor in our third league game and that went in too!"

He even scored twice from the penalty spot in a 2-0 home win over Barnet as Maidstone eventually finished Gola Conference runners up to Enfield by a single point, with Wealdstone third. Allen Batsford's team had had a fabulous season after promotion from the Southern League and the games against Maidstone were both cracking affairs - goalless at Lower Mead but a sensational 3-0 win at Maidstone on Easter Saturday.

But Willie Watson was a notable absentee from both games. "Around that time I was suffering from a viral infection that kept flaring up. It went on for about 18 months which restricted my appearances. I would have loved to played in those games because I had a lot

of friends still at Wealdstone - Stu Pearce, Robin Wainwright and Alan Cordice who I'd room with on England international matches. When Peter Taylor left the club to coach at Exeter City I took over his role - and the next thing you knew we were drawn against Exeter in the FA Cup and knocked them out!"

Willie was only touching 30 but his career was winding down. "I had an approach from Ken Knighton at Dagenham who admitted he'd never seen me play but wanted me to come over in a player/coach role....it was the season Wealdstone won the Conference and the Trophy and finally I managed to play against them, but our striker Steve Whitton missed three easy chances and we lost 1-0".

His last game was for the Daggers was at Swindon Town in the FA Cup. Dagenham won 2-1 but Willie broke his hand and at the end of that season he was offered the chance to become landlord of Shades, a pub in Lower High Street, Watford.

"I knew I couldn't play for much longer and being a coach in those days meant just being a dogsbody... although I took my preliminary badge (along with Steve Brinkman) just so I could say I had that qualification. Sounds a bit silly but I wanted to have proof that football was my trade"

He was a publican for eight or nine years until the recession began to bite - so Willie took over another pub in Kings Langley while he did The Knowledge (licensed black taxi qualifications) and embarked on his cabbying career.

So what is Willie up to these days, now he's 65? "Well, I'm still a cabbie, had a black cab for 25/30 years now. I live in Toddington (in Bedfordshire, just by the M1) with my second wife Christine and drive down to London for work every day - around the hotels mainly - leaving home about 3am and driving back about 1pm. I've been doing it for a long time but not as long as The Duck... although he's given up driving for the moment and now works at Budgens in Abbots Langley, just round the corner from where he lives. I used to see him every day when we were both cabbying but now we meet up to play golf mainly. I've been a member at Grimsdyke Golf Club in Harrow Weald for 15 years now, but when I play George it's more often at Whipsnade near Dunstable... it's quieter there and people can't see how bad he is :)

"He plays golf like he used to play: Very studied and careful. Like his penalties, he makes a science of it. Even when he was playing football, he worked hard to get his balance just right so he could volley and head the ball so well. But his golf is definitely getting worse..."

"My main thing now is going off middle-aged cruising! I'm not retired just yet but we love going off on theme cruises, particularly music ones. We've seen The Troggs, Yardbirds, Jerry and the Pacemakers although he's old enough to need one now! We're going around the Greek Islands next summer, plus the Caribbean in the New Year so we don't do too badly".

Between them, Willie and Christine have four kids and eight grandchildren. And coincidentally, three of them (Alex and Mason Yerby, 12 and 10 years old, and six year old Ralph Miles, who live in Maple Cross) are playing for Wealdstone Youth under Ronnie Welch. And yes, for the (much) older Stones fans among us, those boys are related to ginger-haired Dave Yerby who played for the Stones in the last amateur days at the turn of the 1970s.

So we could see a Willie Watson descendant back in a Wealdstone first team shirt one day. And no doubt as bad a loser as his grandad!

Willie for England

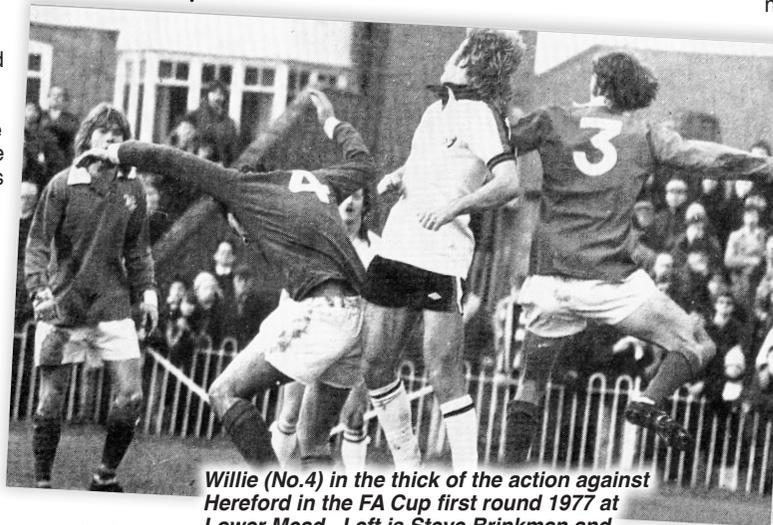


Willie Watson's first cap came in 1979 at the inaugural non-League tournament, staged at Stafford Rangers. The amateur game had become officially unrecognised in the mid-70s but it wasn't until the formation of the Alliance Premier League in 1979 that it was decided to form a representative non-League XI - and Stafford, one of the inaugural members of the APL, was chosen to host the first tournament.

"I can't remember much about it, except that we won it" says Willie. 'Scotland, Italy and Holland were in it and we beat the Dutch in the final'. With the Stones among the weaker teams in the League it was quite an accolade for our club captain to be chosen - and he was quickly made skipper of the England side too. An honour he held on to over the next six years, and 18 caps as England remained the strongest side in Europe. I recall travelling up to Scarborough in 1983 to watch England beat Scotland - and Italy beat Holland - on the same day, with Willie in majestic midfield form for his country (then a Maidstone player) while Wealdstone's Alan Cordice zoomed around up front to finish top scorer in that tournament. Scotland fielded striker Mo Johnson, who went on to make a name for himself with Watford and Everton.

The Stones' Neil Cordice and Paul Bowgett were also on the radar of the England selectors but missed out through injury.

"I told Keith Wright (the England manager) about how good Stuart Pearce was but he just said 'I've got a left back and that's John Davison'... well Altrincham's Davison was very sold and reliable but he was nowhere near as dynamic as Pearcey. I think he missed a trick there, but Stuart didn't do too badly in the end".



Willie (No.4) in the thick of the action against Hereford in the FA Cup first round 1977 at Lower Mead. Left is Steve Brinkman and No.3 Alan Fursdon