

THE **BIG** INTERVIEW

We've finally tracked him down.. it's our double-winning hero of 1985

ANDY GRAHAM

By TIM PARKS

Pictures courtesy of STEVE MARSHALL and JON TAFFEL



▲ WINNING THE LEAGUE Andy Graham (circled) is congratulated by some still-recognisable Stones fans after the final whistle at Kettering in May 1985

A Andy Graham, Andy Graham, Andy Andy Graham...when he gets the ball, he scores a goal, Andy, Andy Graham.

That was the chant that reverberated around Lower Mead in the Spring of 1985 as a tall, balding centre-forward came from 'nowhere' and exploded into the consciousness of every Stones fan within the space of three glorious months – shooting our team to the non-League double with a series of unbelievable goals.

He was the cult hero to end all cult heroes. An unlikely-looking figure who forced his way into Brian Hall's title-challenging team at the business end of the season and almost single-handedly blasted the goals that cemented the Stones' place in football history.

What joy, then, when I finally managed to track down the reclusive Graham a couple of weeks ago, through a journalist pal who went to primary school with him in Stockport. Ironically it was on the eve of the

class of 2012's own Trophy semi-final adventure, the semi-final first leg at Newport.. though of course that was why the Mancunian returned my call.

Had he heard about our exploits this season?

"Yes, yes, but I'm the biggest technophobe around. I've been trying to following things via the internet but you wouldn't believe what I don't know!

"I'm a history teacher and my head is literally full of books and marking... plus the fact I live in the Wirral (Liverpool) means I'm a little remote. But I know you're playing Newport over two legs and I'm actually keen on getting to the game in Wales – it's not as far from here as London".

I'd heard from our mutual friend Howard Wheatcroft, sports editor of the Daily Star, that Andy's school pupils had recently discovered 'Sir's' claim to fame on YouTube: His fabulous goal at Wembley in the 1985 Trophy Final.

"Yes" he laughed. "But they really didn't believe it was me. You look at a 51-year-old man and it seems a bit improbable to them! But it's a

moment I'm really proud of."

What does he remember of the game?

"Blimey, it was a long time ago, but not much really, apart from the great occasion. The funny thing about that goal, though, was that Brian Greenaway held two hands up as he was about to take it – which signalled a deep cross to the back stick, aimed at Lee Holmes or Bowgett. But he slipped and screwed the ball across the front of the box – though fortunately I saw it coming and managed to get my right foot to the ball. It was a slight miscontrol that flipped the ball up in the air, but I was pleased with that 'cos it meant I could swivel and hit the ball with my left foot, over my shoulder.

"I'm not bragging but I don't think there was anybody better in the game than me with my back to goal.. it just came naturally. I knew instinctively how to beat players when I was being closely marked and got an awful lot of goals from just 'rolling' big defenders that were marking really tightly.

"So when that ball sat up nicely I

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knew I would get a decent strike on goal and it was magic to see the ball fly in at Wembley. A magic start to the game.

"And then Howard (Wheatcroft) told me a couple of years ago that he had interviewed Kevin Blackwell, the ex-Leeds and Sheffield boss who was in goal for Boston that day, and ended by asking him 'By the way, how did you let my old mate Andy Graham beat you from 20 yards from the corner of the box in the Trophy final?'" and Blackwell replied: "Let him beat me? Let him beat me? How could I have ****ing saved that?" It made my day!

So what was the story of Andy joining Wealdstone? From my own hazy memory of 1985, he seemed to just appear from out of the ether and start banging in outrageous goals.

"Well I suppose I was from 'Oop North' so nobody would have heard of me" he laughed. "But I was in my early-mid 20s and had been scoring plenty of goals in the Northern Premier League and NW League for Lancaster City and Hyde United... but I wanted to move South for work and found a job teaching history in Hounslow. My footballing CV was pretty good too, and I'd

played at a good level with the British Universities side who were coached by a fella called Roy Miller, who was also coach to the Northern Ireland squad.

"Roy told me I was good enough to play in the lower divisions, and certainly good enough for the Conference (or Gola League, as it was called then)..."

"And you'll like this next bit. Quite unbelievable really...I thought I'd phone round a few clubs at that level and Wealdstone looked a good bet.. but they were top of the table and that put me off a bit! So I phoned Barnet who were lower-mid table, and spoke to Barry Fry... who promptly told me I would be kicked all over the place if I came down for training! And then told me that Barnet were terrible payers! I told him I didn't want paying.. I had a job and just wanted to show someone what I could do. But he was so aggressive you wouldn't believe it!

"Then, happily, I heard from a Uni pal who said Wealdstone were friendly and happy to look at new players. So I came down training and think I impressed people pretty quickly.. I was doing well in the five-a-sides and turning people like 'Polly'

Perkins and Dennis Byatt inside out.

"But you can't change a winning team and so I had to sit it out..."

So you spent some time on the bench with Vinnie Jones then?

"Wow, Vinnie Jones! Tell you what, I spent too much time on the bench with Vinnie! We were both on the fringe of the first team but, and again I'm not bragging, but I was twice the player Vinnie was. But he was so keen, so determined to make it.

"I'll tell you a story. One evening we were in the café just round the corner from the ground, just me and Vinnie, having beans on toast and tea or something before training, and he asked me what I'd been doing all day. I told him I'd been teaching history – really boring – and asked what he'd been up to. He told me he'd been hod carrying for his dad on a building site. So I asked if that was what he saw himself doing – because he was a really ordinary footballer, to be honest – but he looked into my eyes and said: 'No way. I'm going to be a pro footballer' and well, I nearly spewed my tea out! He was the worst player in the whole squad!

"But he had balls. Real balls. Ask him to climb up a floodlight pylon to change a bulb and he'd do it, no



▲ **DESPERATE MOMENTS** Andy (no.10) helps defend Stones slender lead that Gola title-winning day at Kettering with Robin Wainwright and plunging keeper Bob Iles. Roy Davies (right) and Neil Cordice are on the posts

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▲ **ADULATION** Andy is mobbed by fans in the Lower Mead car park as Stones returned as Gola League Champions

questions asked. He was up for anything. So credit to him for making it happen... though it was unbelievable that a couple of years later he was playing in the First Division for Wimbledon and scoring the winning goal against Manchester United..

"Our winger that season, Brian Greenaway, had played in Division One for Fulham and alongside George Best when he turned out at the Cottage, and he was absolutely gobsmacked at what Vinnie had done! That moment in the café in Station Road still makes me laugh..."

So back to early 1985. After waiting for his big chance at Wealdstone it's handed to him on a plate.

A debut against Southern League leaders Welling United at Lower Mead in the Third Round of the FA Trophy – equalling the Stones best-ever progress in that competition. I have to admit that I was not at the game: I was covering Enfield's 6-1 win at Harrow Borough that same afternoon in the same competition, and therefore missed Andy's meteoric introduction to the Stones faithful.

But I do recall a conversation with rabid Stones fan Mick Fishman late

that afternoon as he quizzed me on Enfield's destruction of Borough and I, in turn, asked him about the win over Welling.

"You won't believe it but we played some fella called Andy Graham up front. We'd never heard of him but he scored a sublime goal and terrorised them. It really was something. We didn't actually miss Mark Graves which says a lot... he won everything in the air but it was Graham's goal that everyone will remember."

There is a neat summing up by Sudhir Rawal in the 'Stones on the Trophy Trail' booklet that recorded that fantastic cup run. He says of the Graham goal against Welling: 'Andy Graham used his height to great effect right from the start and and, with Alan Cordice providing crosses with contemptuous ease, Stones were in the driving seat even before Graham stunned the crowd into rapturous delight.'

'He received a Roy Davies pass on the edge of the box, controlling it on his chest and then, in one fluid movement, turned and volleyed an unstoppable shot into the far corner of the net. Graham, in his usual manner, turned away in quite aplomb while all around him mayhem was breaking

out.

'The goal, in my opinion, is second only to Neil Cordice's fabulous volley against Yeovil a few years previously, for its brilliant execution.'

What is Andy's verdict on that strike against Welling? "Well I remember going into every game determined, first up, to win everything in the air, and that Welling game was great in that respect. I was holding the ball up, heading it on, and really pleased with my debut... and of course the goal topped it off, a really sweet strike but as I said earlier, I was confident that once I had the chance to play I would start scoring those sort of goals.

"Alan Cordice, by the way, was fantastically fast. Real s**t off a shovel. His finishing wasn't the best but his pace got him into positions nobody else could get into. His brother Neil was the better player with a great shot on him but not as fast.. if you could combine the two brothers you'd have had one hell of a good footballer".

I told Andy at this point that Neil Cordice was the only player (in my opinion) to rival himself in the 'best ever striker of a ball in Wealdstone history' stakes.

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"Well, Neil didn't score many for the Stones in my brief time there" he countered, "but he did have excellent technique... though what I most remember him for is being credited with the first goal in the semi-final first leg at Enfield. It was my goal!"

What, the one that crept past John Jacobs at a snail's pace after being deflected off you?

"Whad'ya mean?" he laughed. "I deliberately diverted the ball across the keeper 'cos it was obvious that Neil's shot was going well wide. It was my goal all over!"

The official club stats show that Andy is credited with just one goal in that game – the second one, deep into the second half – while Neil is indeed given the opening goal. In his time at the Stones Andy scored 15 goals in 33 starts, with four in the Trophy – a goal in every round after his debut.

"That should be FIVE Trophy goals!" he thundered. "It should be 16 goals in 33 appearances, nearly one every other game... not a bad return, eh?"

Indeed it is a brilliant return. And what was even better is that EVERY goal Andy scored was memorable. Barely a tap-in or scrambled effort among them.

Two weeks after the Welling FA Trophy belter, his first Gola League goal in a blue shirt came at Maidstone on March 9, 1985 – the only goal in a crucial 1-0 win against our title challengers.

Did he remember his Gola League debut a week before that at Barrow? "To be honest, no. Did we lose it 2-1? Actually, I DO remember something about it.... Brian Hall whacked someone in the face on the train going up who had been verbally abusing his own wife! Brian had tried to restrain

him, then muttered about being an ex-police officer, and then he just smacked him one! He certainly got the respect of his own players after that!"

So by that stage the Stones were in uncharted Trophy waters. The quarter-final. Against Frickley Athletic at home.

Once again I have to confess that I was desperately unhappy to have to miss the game as Enfield (whom I was covering as Sports Editor of the Enfield Gazette) were themselves in quarter-final action at Maidstone.... So again came the phone call to Mick the Fish (after Enfield's 1-0 win) for the latest instalment of the Andy Graham Trophy story.

"Blimey Tim, you won't believe this but he did it again. After SIXTEEN SECONDS this time! He only went and scored with our first attack. Amazing stuff. Alan Cordice slung over a cross and Andy Graham got up to nod the ball in, classic centre-forward's header. Then we had all the pressure and Andy set up a second goal for Alan, flicking the ball on for

Alan to race away and beat the keeper all ends up. We're in the semi's!"

Andy Graham, by now, had official hero status. It was further confirmed in the 35th minute of the semi-final first leg at Enfield when Neil Cordice's shot "hit the back of Andy Graham's heel and slowly rolled into the back of the Enfield net past the dejected John Jacobs" to quote one Jeremy Albert from the 'Stones Trophy Trail' booklet.

Personally, that semi-final pairing of Enfield v Wealdstone was a God-send. At last I could watch the Stones for the first time since the First Round defeat of Harlow!

But now I had to own up to Andy that I had been less than complimentary about his opening goal in the Enfield Gazette Match report. I described it as **'The Biggest Freak Since The Elephant Man'**

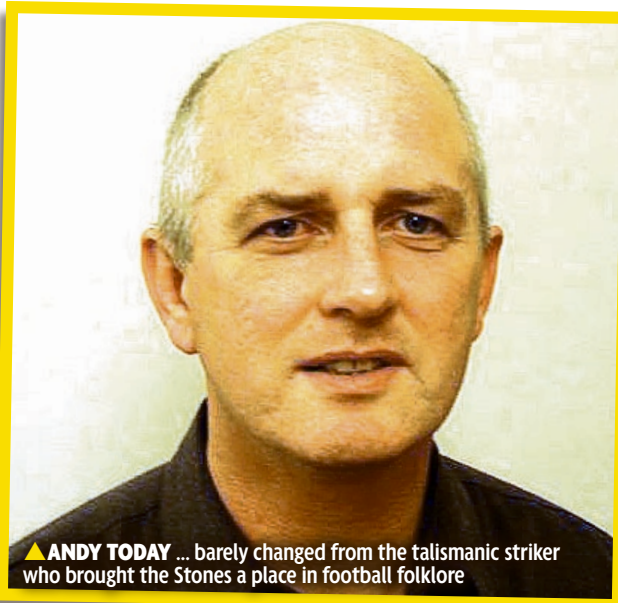
"No!" exploded Andy. "You actually described it that way? Elephant Man! No!"

"Actually, I love that. To be honest, John Merrick would have fitted into that team. There were a few freaks to be fair!"

At this point there was a bit of 'Elephant Man' badinage going on. 'I'm not a No.10, I'm a human being'... that sort of stuff. (For the benefit of younger readers, The Elephant Man was a hit film of the mid-1980s starring John Hurt as John Merrick, a famous Victorian freak show fair-ground attraction because of his bizarre, and tragic, elephantine looks).

But back to the football. Andy rightly points out that there was no dispute about the second goal that day, one that he still recalls some 27 years later with absolute clarity.

"It was such a tense occasion. Enfield were a



▲ **ANDY TODAY** ... barely changed from the talismanic striker who brought the Stones a place in football folklore

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very good team and had a lot of the ball but we were so sound defensively they just blew themselves out. And we were very good at picking teams off on the counter attack... the second goal came when Paul Bowgett played the ball across the box and it was only half-cleared to where I was lurking... I killed the ball with my right foot and just steered it past the keeper with my left into the opposite corner. A really important goal because we knew Enfield were at their most vulnerable at home... that was our best chance really."

The second leg saw Andy and Vinny Jones both play the full 90 minutes- who would have thought that a few months previously? – and the Stones squeezed through on a 2-1 aggregate.

Then there was the small matter of tying up the Gola League Championship.

After the famous five-wins-in-eight-days sequence in March that put the Stones in pole position for winning the league – with Andy Graham playing every game against Weymouth (Saturday March 23), Altrincham (Monday March 25), Gateshead (Wednesday March 27), Runcorn (Saturday March 30) and Scarborough (Sunday March 31) – we stuttered after getting to Wembley.

Just one win in five games made it a nervous finale. Bath City were on our coat-tails and there was an amusing evening at Enfield on Friday March 3 – the day before our penultimate game at Kettering- when dozens of Stones fans travelled to Southbury Road in hope of a home victory over the Somerset side. The only time Wealdstone fans have wanted Enfield to win! And equally, Es fans were

secretly wanting Bath to win to scupper our own chances!

The result was a draw. Which left the Stones needing one win from the final two games – both away at Kettering and Barnet – to clinch the title. And thus, Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man... who else should step forward, with a match-winning goal of rare luminescence, than Andrew Graham?

"It was a deep cross from Greeners, I think, and I remember watching the ball carefully as it travelled through the air towards the back edge of the box... but I caught it perfectly on my trusty left peg and the ball flew into the bottom far corner. A great, great moment for me and for the fans".

It was just as well we wrapped the title up at Kettering, then, because the last game was against Barnet and your old pal Barry Fry, I tell Andy. Do you remember that one?

"Oh yes. A bit embarrassing because it was a week before the Trophy Final and we rested a few players and lost 7-0... I wasn't picked and was pleased 'cos I thought then I had a chance of playing at Wembley. But it wasn't nice losing to Barry Fry. I'd have enjoyed beating them.

"Tell you something, that man has no class at all. A few years later I was at Wycombe Wanderers in the Conference and we were losing 6-1 I think it was, at Barnet who were an excellent side by then. And who gets changed and brings himself on as substitute for the last few minutes? Barry Fry! Probably in his 40s by then. Complete disrespect for Wycombe who were pretty upset about it. Terrible etiquette. I could say a few worse things but I won't..."

So what happened post-Wembley, Andy? You didn't really figure much the following season and were gone by the summer of 1986?

"Yes, that pretty much sums it up. To be frank, my face didn't really fit with Mr Hall even though I'd proved I could score goals at that level. He was too impressed with players who'd played League football, and kept picking Mark Graves over me. Don't get me wrong, Mark is a lovely bloke but he'd only played a few times for Plymouth and in my eyes he wasn't going to get the goals I'd get.



▲ **WYCOMBE WONDER** Andy is pictured 2nd from right in the back row (next to Noel Ashford) after he'd helped the excellent Wanderers side collect the Isthmian League title in 1987

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"So I was back on the bench, at best. I played a lot of games at the end of the 1985-86 season but it was soured a little by not really feeling wanted... and the fact, as I later found out, that the club had had approaches from Mansfield and Chesterfield to sign me, but not told me about it. Fair enough if I was a contracted player but I was non-contract... Brian Hall and Peter Braxton, the secretary, should have been up-front but they weren't.

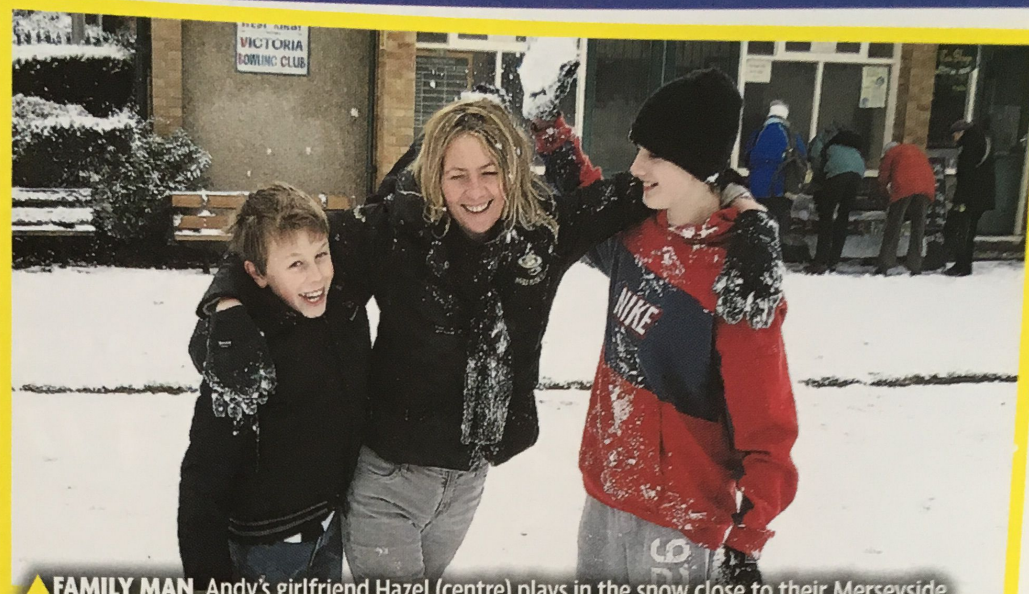
"In the end I had a good offer from Wycombe

Wanderers to play at Loakes Park, and had a brilliant season there. They had just been relegated from the Conference back into the Vauxhall-Opel Premier League (now the Ryman Premier) but were putting a good side together under Alan Gane. I scored 20-odd goals from left-midfield and the fans were all over me!"

That was an excellent team that held off Yeovil to win the title, with crowds of over 2,000 cramming Wycombe's old ground for the final games. Gane had pulled off a real coup by luring Enfield's star performers Noel Ashford and Keith Barrett into Buckinghamshire, and with top strikers Mark West, Declan Link and Barry Silkman (for a while) in their ranks there was no place up front for the prolific Andy.

So he slotted onto a left-sided role and the goals flowed towards the end of a record-breaking season for the Chairboys.

Wycombe were back in the Conference but Andy wasn't... boss Gane was sacked and he made Mr Graham "a very good offer" to move to Staines Town, which was just around the corner from where Andy and his wife were living. "That was another good move for me... it was a step down into the Vauxhall Opel Div One but we won the title that first season. It meant I had won three titles in four



▲ **FAMILY MAN** Andy's girlfriend Hazel (centre) plays in the snow close to their Merseyside home with Andy's son Oliver (right) and his pal Robbie (left)

season... a bit of a lucky mascot!

"But then my wife decided she wanted to go back up north, so it was back up the motorways again.... I had an offer from Northwich Victoria so found myself back in the Conference again in my late twenties, but by this time Wealdstone had been relegated. A shame because I was looking forward to seeing the fans and some of the old players."

Andy's career then petered out with a few seasons back at Hyde United in the Northern Premier League where he is still fondly remembered by the fans. On their club forum is the entry:

"My favourite memory of Andy is his 90th minute winner at at Stalybridge in April 1992 to give us a 2-1 victory. Results elsewhere meant that 'Bridge were champs and got promoted to the Conference, but we rained on their parade with the help of Andy's late score."

So how is life now treating our former hero? Is he a happy man up in Merseyside?

I tell him that he's got a definite trace of Scouse mixed in with his Mancunian accent after having now lived 20 years on Merseyside.

"That's about the most insulting thing you can say to a Manc!" he laughs. "Have you no idea of the

cultural rivalry between Liverpool and Manchester? No, actually you're probably right but I'm a big Man City fan and it's no good being a City fan with a Scouse twang!

"But life is treating me well, now. I divorced a few years ago now but I've got a great son, Oliver who's 14, who comes with me to games at the Etihad. And I've been going out with my lovely girlfriend, Hazel, for four years now, so life is pretty good. Yeah, it's pretty good.

"I'm glad things are looking up for Wealdstone. I've not really been able to track what they've been up to in the last 25 years – I know they've ground shared at Watford, but after that is all a mystery to me" (at this point I fill Andy in on our history and he is amazed at how far the club fell, and how quickly).

"So wow, to have beaten teams like Cambridge and Dartford and Barrow were real giant-killings. I didn't realise they were two leagues above you. Back in '85, I think all the teams we beat in the Trophy were lesser-ranked teams so this is a great achievement. To get to the final would be amazing".

Hopefully you'd come down to Wembley then if we get there on May 12th?

"Oh absolutely. Love to. And see the end where I scored all those years ago. It's a date"