

CHAPTER FOUR

1935 – BURNLEY

LEARNING THE TRADE

For the first three months, Tommy and Grandad Jim made the bus trip from Bolton to Burnley daily, a round trip of about 40 miles. Initially, most of the route was familiar, across to Ramsbottom then a wait before moving on to Rawtensall, the closest town to where Rossendale United played, then on again to Burnley. From leaving home to arriving at Turf Moor took two hours. In the morning Tommy would work in the club offices, while Jim was employed on the 'A' team ground. In the afternoon, Tommy would train with the other youngsters on the groundstaff and he soon became a regular in the 'A' team.

As a town, Burnley was very different to Bolton. Tommy had been used to Bolton's long, dark terraced streets. Burnley was smaller, built along the Calder Valley and apparently surrounded by hills, with Ingleborough and Pen-Y-Ghent in the far distance. The town's buildings were black and sooty but the outlook was lighter and less claustrophobic than Bolton.

In 1929, Burnley was the biggest cotton weaving town in the world and when Tommy moved there in 1935, the main feature of the place was the cluster of mill chimneys jutting up and over the Calder Valley and only mill owners, never footballers, had made their names and fortunes there. The club found the family a rent-free house on Brunshaw Road at the top of the hill from the Turf Moor ground. Tommy was then able to put in extra training in the evenings and he quickly settled into life at a league club, loving the whole exciting atmosphere of the place, even though Burnley were struggling in the Second Division. One of the reasons he enjoyed life so much was the influence of Ray Bennion.

Throughout his early life, Tommy was fortunate to be guided by a succession of individuals who had his best interests at heart – his Grandad, Pop Lever and Bill Horrocks at school, Ray Bennion at his first club. Bennion had retired the previous season after a career spanning 14 years, 12 with Manchester United where he was a tough, uncompromising half-back, good enough to win ten caps for Wales. As club coach at Turf Moor, he soon spotted Lawton's potential.

During his first summer at Burnley, Tommy worked with Bennion every day. With the coach in goal, Tommy was encouraged to shoot from every angle "Hard as you like, into the corners." When Bennion needed a break from picking the ball out of the back of the net, he would chalk a spot on the wall of the stand and Lawton had to hit it nine times out of ten,

while Bennion sat close by keeping count. His most famous scheme to improve Lawton's skills was to send him dribbling round the touchline. Every time he arrived at an advertising hoarding announcing "Burnley's Beer Is Best" he was to swivel and shoot to hit the capital 'B's on the sign. Failure meant starting all over again. More than anything, Tommy thought, it was this training routine that produced his deadly accurate shot.

Tommy had also discovered a new hero. George Brown. Brown had played nine times for England, seven times as inside-forward to Dixie Dean, which to Tommy only increased his aura. He was in the Huddersfield Town team that won a hat-trick of championships under Herbert Chapman between 1924 and 1926. At Aston Villa, he was capped again before he moved to Burnley. Aged 33 he was nearing the veteran stage though he was far from finished.

Young Lawton immediately admired and liked him. "He was a charming chap, wonderful company. He showed me many of the skills that had taken him to the top. I hung on his every word and attempted to develop my game along the same lines." At the start of the 1935/36 season, Lawton was still in the 'A' team but scoring goals. Bennion's advice to him "Whenever you see the white line of the penalty box – hit it" was paying off. In September 1935, just before his 16th birthday, Burnley's manager, Tom Bromilow, decided Lawton was ready to make his debut for the Reserves at Maine Road against Manchester City. Tommy was unhappy with his performance. "I didn't do very well at the start in the reserves. It was a big step up for a lad of only 15, but I went back to the 'A' team, practised and trained even harder and I got another chance." For the 'A' team, Lawton scored 25 goals, at an average of about a goal a game.

Tommy acknowledged the help he received from the senior professionals at Burnley during that time. Captain Alick Robinson and goalkeeper Tommy Hetherington were particular influences. Ronnie Hornby and centre-half Bob 'Reo' Johnson were also always ready to give him a tip and a word of advice. Lawton kept his place in the second team, despite, for the first time in his life, finding goalscoring was not easy – just three in 13 appearances – but his all-round play regularly impressed. Meanwhile, Burnley were struggling for survival in the Second Division. In the seven matches after beating Bradford City 3-0 on February 1st, Burnley scored just three goals and picked up only five points out of a possible 14.

George Brown had by now moved on to First Division Leeds United; Welshman Ces Smith was at centre-forward but had not scored for eight games. Ray Bennion suggested to chairman Tom Clegg that Lawton should be given a chance with a comment along the lines of "He can't do any worse and a taste of league football would be good experience for him."

So Lawton became the youngest Burnley centre-forward ever to play league football at 16 years 174 days. The first man to congratulate him on his selection was Ces Smith, the man he had displaced. Alongside him, Bob

Brocklebank, recently signed from Aston Villa, was to make his home debut and Ernie Hancock was moved from right wing to inside-right. Other players, before and since have made their league debuts at an earlier age. Albert Geldard, later to play alongside Lawton at Everton first appeared on the wing for Bradford Park Avenue in 1929 aged 15 years and 158 days, but to entrust the coveted number nine shirt to a lad of 16 was unheard of. The *Burnley Express and News* trumpeted 'Burnley's Boy Leader' and surmised that no more than one centre-forward ('Sportsman' suggested 'Boy' Browell of Hull City) had made his league debut at an earlier age.

Immediately, Lawton was a crowd puller. An above average 12,350 were there at Turf Moor to see his debut, but the 1-1 was a disappointment. The *Express and News* described the performance as "puerile, the season's worst – Burnley get a point they did not deserve." Tommy saw little of the ball, though the crowd roared encouragement whenever he did. His one shot at goal went narrowly wide and he completely mis-kicked in a crowded penalty area when a Hancock corner reached him ten yards from goal. 'Sportsman' thought Lawton "keen and fearless" but pointed out that Bycroft, the Doncaster centre-half, had him permanently under control as he "kept him on the blind-side, or the young centre-forward found himself faced with the task of trying to scramble the ball past a trio of defenders. He might have improved his role had he left the centre-of the field more and so drawn Bycroft, who stuck to him closer than a brother, out of position."

Many years later Tommy recalled the game and "big, burly" Syd Bycroft – "I'll never forget that experience. I've still got the bruises from what he did that day!" Bycroft was playing his first game at centre-half for Doncaster "He wasn't there to be belittled by a callow youth, he gave me no quarter and taught me there's a world of difference between a good amateur and a good professional." Burnley earned a point from the game with a late penalty.

Tommy was downcast having failed to do what he had been selected for – score a goal. "I didn't play very well. I was overawed. I thought I'd let everyone down. I cried myself to sleep that night and thought I'd be better off giving up the game, there was no future for me." Fortunately, the Burnley directors, selectors too in those days, had seen enough to think he deserved another chance. There were eight matches to go in the season, relegation was a distinct possibility as they were fourth from the bottom of Division Two, a point ahead of Barnsley and Port Vale, and had scored only 38 goals, one fewer even than Hull City, marooned nine points adrift at the bottom of the table.

The next match was away at the Vetch Field against Swansea Town. The near 500 mile round trip was, at that time, the longest journey Lawton had made in his life. "It started on Friday morning when we caught a train at Burnley station for Manchester. Changed onto another for Shrewsbury and then another for Swansea and the real journey began! We just went on for

hours through Wales calling at all sorts of out of the way places before we reached Swansea just as it was getting dark.”

The next day, young Tommy Lawton truly arrived in league football as he scored two Burnley goals in a 3-1 win. Midway through the first half, Ronnie Hornby crossed from the left. High above everyone else in the area, Lawton’s head made contact with the ball and it bulleted past goalkeeper Stan Moore into the back of the net. His first goal in the Football League that became a trademark for so many of his next 230. “I was mesmerised. Alick Robinson raced across to hug me. Together we dashed over to Ronnie Hornby. I was overjoyed.” In the second half, Robinson, from left-half, produced the perfect through pass that Lawton ran onto and, right footed, hit powerfully past the goalkeeper for his second. Naturally, Lawton was pleased with himself. “I went back into the dressing room with a head the size of Birkenhead. Full of beans, dancing about. The other lads said ‘You might think you’re the cat’s whiskers now y’know but you won’t do that every week.’ I paid no attention to them, but then Billy Dougall, the trainer shouted ‘Just ‘cos you’ve got two goals, don’t start thinking you’re a great player, now sit down and be quiet.’”

At Swansea Victoria station, Lawton tried to buy an *Evening Post* to see the match report. Alick Robinson saw what he was about to do and strode across to stop him. On the way home, the Burnley captain told the still excited youngster “Don’t think too much of yourself. You’ve a long way to go and a lot to learn.” The team returned to Burnley in the early hours of Sunday morning. Tommy was still on a ‘high.’ “Billy Dougall took me home and said to my grandad – ‘He’s not to see the papers. Take out the sports page and throw it on the fire.’ At the time I was really cheesed off about it, but it was the beginning of me keeping my nut down. A good thing.”

Even in the morning when Tommy ran downstairs to see the Sunday paper, his grandfather had beaten him to it. The sports pages were burning in the fire. “I wanted to go down to the ground y’know and show off – ‘Look at me, I’m the greatest!’ but my Grandad wouldn’t let me. He made me stay in all day.”

The following weekend was Easter. Tommy was looking forward to playing three games in four days, two against Manchester United. On Good Friday he lined up against them in front of the biggest crowd at Turf Moor that season, 27,245. United were in contention for the championship of Division Two, which, eventually, they achieved, though narrowly, ahead of Charlton Athletic. Wing-half Jimmy Brown, who had moved to United from Burnley in June 1935 was back at Turf Moor for the first time, while in United’s forward line, George Mutch was their top goalscorer, signed the previous season from Aberdeen for £800. A year later, Mutch was on his way to Preston for £5,000 earning instant fame when he scored the winning penalty in the 1938 FA Cup Final at Wembley in the last moments of extra-time against Huddersfield.

“We really wanted to win that game, as much for Ray Bennion, who’d

played at United for years, as for the club, because we were still in relegation trouble. In the end we got a draw, 2-2. Tommy Bamford, a Welsh international, scored their two. He wasn't a big fella, but he was quick. He could play anywhere, centre-forward or out on the wing. I couldn't do anything against their centre-half, George Vose. He was a Lancashire lad, a great player, not just a stopper, he could really play." Vose was from St Helen's. United had spotted him playing for his local team, Peasley Cross. Tall, fair haired and good-looking, he had played in an England trial game that season, but was never capped. On Good Friday 1936, Lawton admitted he made little impression on Vose. "He was too good for me. Whatever I tried, he had covered. That's how football is though. Two goals against Swansea, then nothing against United. Up and down." *The Daily Dispatch* confirmed Lawton's view : "Lawton, 16-years-old but strong and plucky, had few decent passes and was practically blotted out by Vose, who was at his best for this important game." Before the end of the game, Tommy pulled up sharply and suffered a groin strain. He was sent home to rest and told to forget about playing in the other two games over the Easter weekend. "Ces Smith came back in for the games against Norwich and the return with United." By then Vose was injured and could not play for United. but it made no difference, Burnley still crashed to a 4-0 defeat. Tommy played in the remaining four games that season for Burnley, scoring three more goals, including two at Bury - "just to show 'em what they'd missed by not signing me!" Burnley avoided relegation, though 15th place in Division Two probably flattered them overall.