

BACK FROM



NO CHANCES:
Graham Potter

POTTER WARY OF CUP SHOCK

■ Dave LYONS

GRAHAM POTTER is determined for Brighton do not become another FA Cup scalper for Newport County.

Potter knows Newport boss Mike Flynn from his time at Wales while in charge of Swansea and fears another tough test in tomorrow night's third-round tie.

Newport have become renowned giant-killers in recent seasons after knocking out Leeds, Leicester and Middlesbrough.

And Brighton boss Potter believes those recent cup successes have given the club confidence of gaining promotion this season — and he hopes that is their only success this term.

Develop

Potter said: "Mike Flynn's done a fantastic job there, he's got a good group that fight for each other.

"They have historically had those results that have allowed them to grow and develop as a club, they're pushing for promotion. They've got a good feeling and they will be looking forward to the game no doubt.

"I came across him a few times when I was at Swansea. I like him — he's a good person, I like his character, I like how he goes about his work. You can see they've made steps as a team since he first arrived and huge credit to him for that.

"They have used the cup runs to boost their profile, to grow the team and the club. I am sure promotion will be the aim for them this year but I am sure they will use an FA Cup run to improve that.



DETERMINATION:
Mark O'Brien and (above)
his scar after heart
surgery

LEAVING HIS MARK ON NEWPORT

MARK O'BRIEN wasn't abandoned by Newport County after open heart surgery last year brought his career to an end for a very good reason.

If it wasn't for the Dubliner, the Welsh outfit might no longer be in existence.

His last-gasp winner against Notts County in May 2017 saved the club from

■ Mark McCADDEN

relegation from the Football League — a potential catastrophe that could have put them out of business.

Since then they have made millions thanks to their FA Cup heroics.

Little wonder that they were

quick to welcome O'Brien back once he was well enough after last year's operation.

"I do commentary for all the home games, which has been great for me," he said.

Analyst

"The club are looking to start their own podcast at some stage and they are

looking for me hopefully to be part of that system.

"The analyst, Jason Windsor, he does the preparation for each game, so I sit in with him a lot of the time and we go through the opposition. Everyone at the club has been amazing for me, letting me get all these different experiences."

IT'S A bittersweet weekend for Mark O'Brien.

This time last year the Dubliner was in FA Cup action for giantkillers extraordinaire Newport County against Millwall.

Twelve months on and standing at the oven long enough to cook dinner is an achievement for the 28-year-old.

Only recently he managed to jog for three minutes without having to rest — a marked improvement on five weeks earlier, when O'Brien could only jog for 30 seconds at a time.

Seven hours of open heart surgery midway through last year "wiped" him out.

The operation ended a playing career that began with a Championship debut for Derby County in 2009 at the age of just 16.

O'Brien, who captained Newport in the FA Cup against Manchester City in 2019, will watch tomorrow's clash with Brighton from the commentary box.

A bittersweet moment for the Ballyfermot man.

"It's difficult going into weekends like this because Newport are posting up pictures of when we played, say, Man City," he told the *Irish Daily Star*.

"Or, we beat Middlesbrough on this day, or Leicester on this day, or Leeds."

In a remarkable three-season spell in the FA Cup, O'Brien faced Leeds, Tottenham, Leicester, Middlesbrough, Manchester City and Millwall.

He played four more times after the 3-0 defeat to the Lions last January before English football went into lockdown.

Routine

A few weeks later, a routine scan brought the news he was both expecting and dreading for years.

The replacement valve that surgeons had inserted a decade earlier, when he first faced open heart surgery as a teenager at Pride Park, was reaching end-of-life.

It would need replacing.

Only this time, doctors warned, there would be no miraculous return to the football pitch.

"With all these different memories and me still having a players' head on my shoulders, I'd give anything to be a part of it again," O'Brien said.

"Just to walk out onto that pitch, to be on that stage, on the telly playing against a Premier League side, I'd give anything."

O'Brien will still be a part of the match-day experience tomorrow.

As well as a club commentary gig, he remains a part of the dressing room, where he assists Newport's performance analyst Jason Windsor.

Through counselling and talking publicly about his experience, he has come to terms with the hand he has been dealt. He has learned to appreciate each small step in his recovery.

On the mental side of things, he said: "I probably underestimated the effect retirement from football would have on me.

"It's opened my eyes a bit more to myself, having to start understanding myself again. Football isn't there as my distraction anymore.

"I never knew to a full extent

THE BRINK

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how much of an anxious person I could be, because I could always direct my anxiety towards football.
"Football was always my get-out clause, where you could go out and play a 90-minute game and whatever was on my mind was completely gone.
"I was in a bubble away from the anxieties that had built up over the last 10 years of my career, with the first heart operation and everything that has happened since."
What about his physical recovery?

Terms

"I am still nowhere where I used to be, but I have come to terms with that," replied the former Ireland underage international, who had 35 first-team appearances for Derby and an ACL tear recovery behind him by the age of just 20.

"A seven-hour operation completely wipes you of everything, and that was another thing that mentally I couldn't understated.

'It's been a long slog and it's been a tough one'

"I was thinking, 'Why can't I just go back out on the track again, why can't I do this or that?'"

"I was very impatient with myself, which was building up the anxiety inside me. But I've come to terms with that and I've been jogging once-a-week, hopefully going to twice-a-week soon.

"We started off very lightly. I would jog for 30 seconds and then walk for five minutes. And I'd do that for a continuous half-an-hour.

"The following week the physio would say, let's try 45 seconds.

"He was the timekeeper, but after a while, he stopped telling me when 45 seconds were up. He would just tell me to jog and say when I felt tired.

"It's not at any quick pace, but we'd jog and plod along.

"Everything was going great and at one stage he turned to me and said, 'You've just jogged for a minute and 20 seconds there'.

"The most recent jog I did was three minutes jogging and two minutes walking over and over again for 30 minutes.

"It was the most I'd done since the operation.

"It knocked me for six afterwards, it was one of the toughest sessions I'd done.

"But to go from jogging for 30 seconds max just four or five weeks earlier to three minutes was a massive improvement.

"And it was a massive eye-opener too. It settled my head a lot more in that I felt I could do a lot more away from football.



THE BIG TIME: O'Brien with Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola two years ago

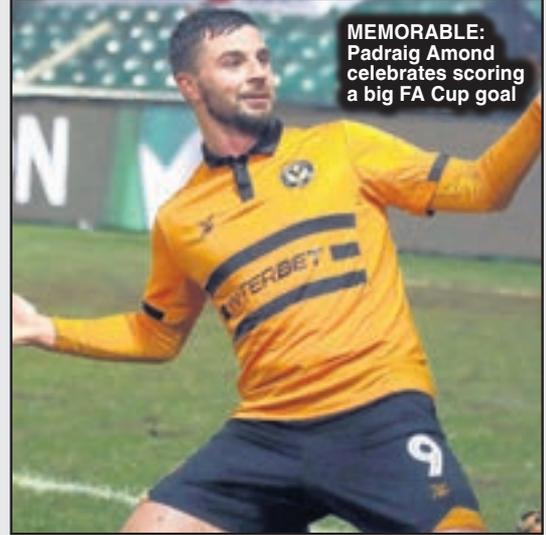
O'Brien making progress after heart surgery

"I could start going out for walks, I could do more long-distance things.
"I could go and make dinners and do all these other different things that I used to be afraid of doing, because I never knew how my heart was going to react to standing up for too long.
"It's been a long slog and it's been a tough one, but having the people around me like I've had, everything has been on the up. It's been brilliant."
O'Brien added: "A seven-hour operation does wipe you of everything — from the strength I had in my legs to the physical fitness I had to get through a

90-minute game.
"All of these different things that I was so used to doing for the last 10 years were all wiped away so quickly.

System

"It was a massive shock to the system, even though I knew it was going to happen.
"But because I had so much on my plate at the time — retiring from football, having to pick up a new outlook on life — I didn't really consider the impact.
"It was all mixing around in one big pot and eventually it reached boiling point, and I didn't know which way to turn.
"Now I'm dissecting it bit by bit and taking it each step at a time, rather than wanting it all to happen for me at once.
"It has been perfect for me and it's something where I'm steadily and slowly getting back to myself."



MEMORABLE: Padraig Amond celebrates scoring a big FA Cup goal

AMOND: CUP CASH CRUCIAL

PÁDRAIG Amond says Newport's 'mad' FA Cup adventures have helped to make the Welsh club Pandemic-proof.

■ **Ciarán Ó RAGHALLAIGH**

The Irish striker has scored 10 goals for Newport in four FA Cup seasons, with his latest coming against big-spending Salford in round two last November, to set up tomorrow's clash with Premier League side Brighton.

tomorrow, offering another opportunity to make more history with a third fourth-round appearance in four seasons.

Newport are also enjoying a solid run in League Two this season, sitting just one point off leaders Carlisle, with a game in hand.

There are no replays on offer this year, but Amond knows that making the trip to an empty Premier League ground lacks appeal anyway.

With the Covid-19 pandemic raging, and clubs all over the world on their knees, Amond and co aren't sweating it — thanks to the cash that rolled in from their FA Cup escapades.

"This weekend gives us an opportunity to get more TV money, and it might be an opportunity to push the boat out in this window and maybe get a player in on loan to get us across the line to promotion.

"Scarily enough, it's that money that has put us in a position to not be as affected as other clubs," said the 32-year-old Carlow man.

"The League Two salary cap is £1.5m, and we could get nearly ten per cent of our budget in this competition...it goes a long way.

"The prize money and TV money in those four years has been vital.

"It'll offset maybe any losses we make through the lack of fans, too, and if we win this game you could end up being on TV in the next round and making, I don't know, something like £300k.

"As a collective unit, in the dressing room, we're not silly, we know what it means to get these wins and good draws.

"This is the first year nobody wants Man United away — because you're missing out on a million quid."

Budget

"To lower-league clubs, they're kind of like free hits, because you budget with what you know is going to happen over the course of a season, so anything that comes from the Cup is a bonus.
"Those games were massive for the future of the club.

Amond could make personal history, too, by adding to his 12 FA Cup goals.

"It's just a crazy thing that we do well in the competition. There's been a bit of luck along the way, getting home games against big teams, is one of them.
"I know that playing Spurs away in Wembley involves playing on a lot bigger pitch than Rodney Parade. Getting those home games helped."

Just one strike would take him clear of Robbie Keane and Jon Walters — currently the top-scoring Irishmen in FA Cup history.

Top flight Brighton visit Rodney Parade

"I did an interview last year and I was told that before I joined Newport they'd only reached the third round once in 30 years...now we've been there — minimum — for the fourth season in a row since I arrived," Amond said.
"There's been a core group of 8, 9, 10 players involved in those years, so it's obviously not just me, but it's been brilliant."

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THE MADNESS

LAVISH black-tie parties, half-time interruptions and regular chats with a future alleged sex trafficker — Robert Maxwell's Oxford United wasn't your run-of-the-mill 1980s football club.

Former Ireland international Davy Langan was there for the best days — winning the old Second Division in 1985 and the League Cup 12 months later.

But away from the on-field fairytale of back-to-back promotions and their only success to date in one of England's big three competitions, there was an interfering owner with no respect for boundaries.

There was also his “down-to-earth” daughter, Ghislaine Maxwell, who is better known these days for her association with Jeffrey Epstein.

She goes to court later this summer on charges of grooming underage girls for the late US financier and sex offender, whose circle of friends included Prince Andrew and Donald Trump.

However, nearly 40 years ago Ghislaine was a bright-eyed 20-something, who was blazing a trail in the male-dominated world of English football.

“She was involved with transfers. She would always be in the directors' room after games,” Langan recalled.

“She would always chat to you and be very friendly.

“You could tell she had a real chief executive feel about her. She was hands-on around the club. She would have her say at times.

Polite

“And in any dealings I ever had with her, she was very polite and nice.

“Whenever we talked to her, she seemed really down to earth. She was just like a normal person.”

Langan still can't get his head around her current situation.

“I couldn't believe it when the (allegations) first came out. I was absolutely shocked. I still can't believe it either,” he said.

Ghislaine was a familiar face around the club, while her dad's was frequently a familiar — and unwelcome — face in the Oxford dressing room.

The late Jim Smith was their experienced and straight-talking boss, as tough as the steel that made his hometown of Sheffield famous.

But even he couldn't stop the club's larger-than-life owner from meddling in matchday affairs.

“Jim had a terrible temper on him,”

FAMILIAR FACE: The owner's daughter and club director Ghislaine Maxwell was close with the Oxford players



GLORY DAYS: Davy Langan (left) and Ray Houghton celebrate with the trophy after the League Cup final win over Queens Park Rangers at Wembley Stadium in 1986



Mark McCADDEN
EXCLUSIVE

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Langan recalled. “If we were losing at half-time there were cups being kicked and the language was unbelievable.

“But as soon as Robert Maxwell walked into the dressing room, Jim completely changed to, ‘Come on lads, let's do this’. No more swear words.

“And Maxwell, if we were losing a game, would say, ‘What's the matter today, chaps?’”

Believe

“Jim would say, ‘We'll sort it out in the second-half, Mr Chairman’.

“Maxwell would reply, ‘Oh, jolly good show’, and then he'd walk off.

“The players couldn't believe that he was coming into the dressing room during a game.

“As soon as Maxwell would walk out, Jim would say, ‘I wish he'd f*** off’.

“But he wouldn't say it to his face, because Maxwell would sack you on the spot.

“Everyone was fed up with him coming in. He was interfering all the

OWNER WAS CENTRE STAGE AS OXFORD MADE HISTORY

time. But he said it was his club, so he could say whatever he wanted.”

Maxwell's spectacular Headington Hill Hall was the scene of many parties.

Players, ordered to arrive in full black-tie, would stand around while Maxwell mingled, smoking a giant cigar.

“We used to go to a lot of parties at Maxwell's. He used to invite the players up for drinks,” said Langan.

“He'd come around and chat to you, but you could tell that he was weird in some ways; very strange.

“You'd have to come up dressed in black tie and he'd have all the waiters bringing over canapes and glasses of wine.

“It was all top-notch. I felt out of place, coming from Ireland, but you had to go along with it. All the players felt out of place.”

There would be other trips to Maxwell's mansion. Langan recalled the one-sided contract talks.

“When he called you up to his mansion to discuss a contract with you, he'd say, ‘This is what I'm giving you, that's what you're getting and you'll sign it’, said the Dubliner.

“There was no negotiating with him. You couldn't say, ‘I don't like this bit or that bit’.”

The relationship between Maxwell and Smith eventually fractured, leading to Smith's departure to QPR ahead of the 1985/86 campaign.

Smith wanted to take a couple of players with him, including 26-time capped Langan.

“I remember when my contract was up and Jim had left to go to Queens Park Rangers, Jim phoned me and said he'd take me with him,” Langan said. “Maxwell must have gotten

wind of it.

“I was living in a flat in Oxford and he phoned me and said, ‘You can forget about going to Queens Park Rangers, I've got a contract for you to sign tomorrow morning’.

“All I could say was, ‘Right, okay’. Then the next morning I had to go down and sign this contract. He was blunt. It was his way or you were finished.

“He had terrible rows with Jim, awful rows. When we got promoted, they had a massive fall-out.

Popular

“Jim was extremely popular with the supporters, whereas with Maxwell there was a little bit of disgruntlement.

“The fans idolised Jim and Maxwell didn't like that, because he wanted to be number one.

“Maxwell would be like, ‘I saved Oxford, it was my money’. So they had a massive bust-up and that's why Jim took the Queens Park Rangers job.”

He remembered how one row in particular rattled Smith, just after they had won promotion to the old First Division.

“We were playing Leeds away. We'd

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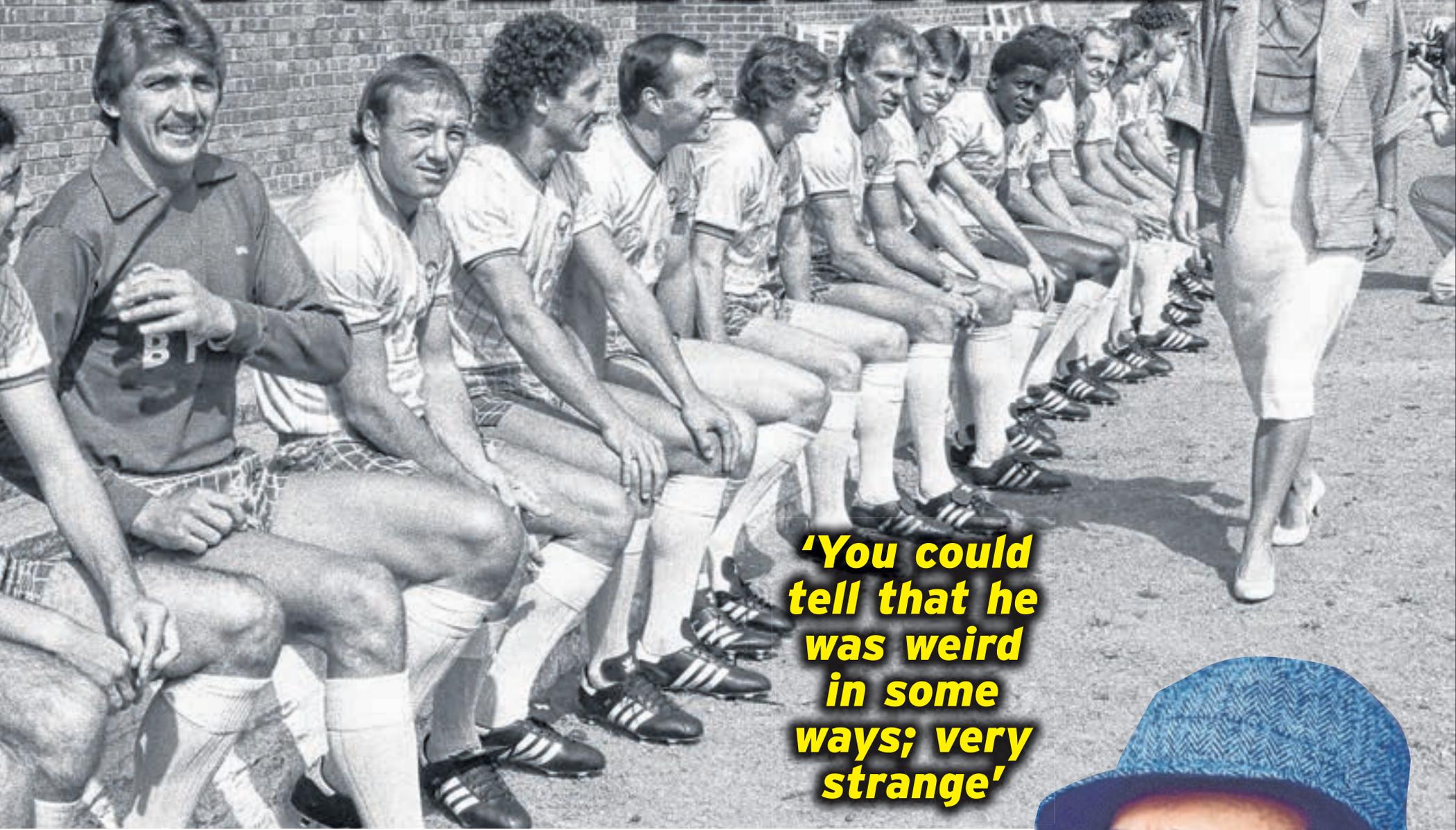
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'You could tell that he was weird in some ways; very strange'



DOMINATING CHARACTER: Robert Maxwell had a colourful reign as Oxford United chairman; (above) his daughter, and club director, Ghislaine with the players during an unveiling of their 1984 jersey

won promotion on the Wednesday night against Shrewsbury and Jim came into the dressing room," said Langan.

"He said, 'I've just had an unmerciful rollocking off Maxwell over me saying we need new players'.

"You could tell that Jim was a bit shaken, so it must have been a very nasty argument.

"Jim was a Yorkshire guy, tough as nails. But he was pretty shook up by whatever was said on the phone."

Ray Houghton was signed the summer Oxford won promotion to the top-flight. He remembers his bizarre contract renegotiation — and how he almost walked out of Headington Hill Hall before putting pen to paper.

"I went there with the late Maurice Evans, who replaced Jim Smith as manager, because I didn't have an agent," Houghton said.

"When we walked in, Robert Maxwell asked, 'What are you doing here?' 'I'm here to talk about a new contract', I replied. 'Okay, I'll be back in a minute', he said.

"We sat there for 40 minutes and there was no sign of him. Eventually he came over, we talked for five minutes and he was off again for another 40 minutes.

"At that stage, I told Maurice I wanted to leave. It was nuts.

"It turned out that he had meetings in lots of different rooms around the house with lots of different companies, and he was giving five minutes to each."

"Eventually we sat down and had a chat. Maxwell asked Maurice who from the England team I played like.

"Maxwell eventually said I reminded him of Mark Wright — who was a centre-half at Southampton! That gives you an understanding of his knowledge about football."

Houghton continued: "The stories are legendary. One time we played Arsenal away and he rang the hotel where we were having our pre-match meal.

"He spoke to our captain at the time and just said, 'If you win the toss, you go for an early goal'. Madness.

"And when we played Aston Villa in the second-leg of the

(1985/86) League Cup semi-final, he came up and gave a team talk.

"Maurice said to me beforehand, when he starts talking to you about the 16-yard line, don't laugh.

"So, when we had a tactics board set up in the changing room, up came Maxwell. He either knew your first or surname, but not both, so he went, 'Houghton, come up here'.

Tactics

"I stood at the tactics board and he said, 'When they have a corner, I want you at the 16-yard line'. The lads were sitting down, sniggering away at this, but I had to keep a straight face.

"He went on, 'They'll head the ball out to you and you then run the length of the field and cross it to Aldridge, who will head it home'.

"That was it. That was his team-talk.

"We did win the game, but I didn't run the length of the field and set up Aldo. But he probably took full credit for the win!"

Back to Langan and one last

anecdote. It was after the Villa game, meanwhile, that he feared he had crossed a line with Maxwell — and that his Oxford days could be numbered.

"Fortunately, the owner was in a good mood, with a trip to Wembley on the horizon."

"When we beat Aston Villa in the semi-finals, I'm seen pouring champagne over him," Langan said. "I thought Maxwell would go mad, but he joined in the craic.

"I was worried though. I thought, 'Have I gone a bit too far here?'. But he was fine with it.

"I wouldn't like to have gotten on the wrong side of him."