As a youngster, my father would take me down to St. Georges Lane to watch ‘City’. It wasn’t glamorous viewing, but Worcester City had a historic feeling to it and the club certainly held a special meaning. During one of these games, I enquired to my father which player ‘Sooty’ was. Of course, for 75 minutes the home fans had been shouting ‘come on City’ in their strong accents. But all I could think was this Sooty sort was quite a player, who certainly had the stamina for the professional leagues.

My father had three choices that day; to laugh, explain or ignore. He chose the first two, something former Worcester City centre-half John Spilsbury couldn’t do when confronted with his managing director as a boy.

John said: “At the MEB – where I worked - you had the workshops and what I used to call the ivory tower where all the staff and the managing director were. When I came back having played three games of cricket on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, they said the manager wanted to see me.

“I’d had three days off but I went up thinking ‘Oh, he wants to say how well I did.’ I knocked the door and he didn’t even say sit down. He said, ‘Spilsbury, I understand you’ve just had three days off for cricket’. I said ‘yes that’s right.’ He replied: ‘I understand in the winter you had time off for football.’

“I said yes again. He explained that I was an apprentice electrician. He said make your mind up; your either going to be an electrician, a footballer or a cricketer but you can’t be all three. I went out and I was stumped.”

These words were the start of a quite moving interview. In fact the word interview is insulting to what was a pleasant conversation, with a man who played football for his home town club Worcester back in the 50’s.

I found my comfort in the midst of John’s conservatory, settling down with some biscuits and coffee. There was no time to waste; I wanted to hear about John’s beginnings.

“I went to St Martin’s school first, but the war was still on. Just after the war finished in 1945 the school started getting together teams for football and cricket.

“My first game ever in football was against Samuel Southall School. There were five in that team who made up the original Worcester City Boys. A lot of them played local football. Trying not to sound big headed, I was the best of the lot.”

Clearly a confident chap, John appeared once for Worcestershire County Cricket Club during his football career, and it was a sport close to his heart as a youngster.

“Cricket never really got going straight away. I’d left school by the time it did, as they didn’t have many matches.

“I played for Worcester City seconds Cricket Club, and we used to play on the county ground when the county weren’t there. I was in the second team at 15 so it all happened when I was very young.

“Next season I was captain of the school boys. The Albion came to watch the matches, but they didn’t really show enough interest. I played for the county schools in 1949, and then I went up to Durham, sent by Claines (one of the youth clubs in Worcester) where they had an FA Coaching Course.

“Peter Winterbottom - the old England manager - was there and so too Eddie Clamp who played for the Wolves. A lot of these (he shows me a picture) went onto first division teams. But I was a local lad from Worcester; never went anywhere and stayed in the City.”

John is a likeable man. He looked a tad nervous to begin with, his hands trembling slightly as he took me through his vast files of pictures and news cuttings.

But as he delved deeper into his fascinating career, he sat back and relaxed. That was when we cracked the subject of Worcester City and his first team debut.

He said: “I was a better cricketer as a boy. I was fit and strong and bowled quite quick but the football just sort of took over. I played in the Worcester League with Worcester City Colts and my first game ever for the City 1st team was a bit of an accident.

“My uncle and my mother are from this pub where I lived called the Farriers. They used to come to all my local games. They went over to Bromyard, and I met the team at the City Ground as usual. I used to walk from the Farriers to the City Ground, and they told me Sam Godfrey’s got boils and can’t play.

“They said I had to play for the 1sts. My mother and that got to Bromyard and the people there told them I wasn’t playing. So they came back to City and watched me. I played the following Monday and three times that season.”

It was this strong family bond that structured a lot of John’s life; particularly his football career. His mother and Uncle Ted were very close to his heart as he explains the story of how he had the chance to play for Stoke.

“I also went up to Stoke City for trials. Our trial match was the Thursday evening and there was quite a decent crowd. I played left back and they left me on for the whole match. Each individual went into the office, but I had no idea what they’d said to the other two. They wanted me to stay on; they mentioned their Saturday practice match and they wanted me to play in that.”

This is where John’s caring and innocent side crept in.

“I said to them my mother thinks I’m going home, I was only 18. They persuaded me to stay and I played in the match.”

What I was about to hear then made me smile. Accompanying me during the interview was Dennis Whittle, a man who worked with John at the MEB and attended college with him. On John’s next comment, I had to turn to Dennis and smile, realising just how good John was and the era he played in.

“Luckily for me, the outside right would have been Stanley Matthews, but he’d just moved to Blackpool. I had quite a good game against his replacement. I tackled really hard with the whole body. I never injured anybody, but I gave players some bruises to let them know I was there.

“After the match the manager said he wanted me to sign. He offered me terms there and then but I said I can’t do that; I’ve got to go home and speak about it.

“I always listened to my mother and my Uncle Ted. It was Uncle Ted who always advised me as by then my mother and father had separated.”

John returned home to dwell on the opportunity to play at Stoke. He was expecting the manager to come down soon and sort out the deal.

“I got back and a few days later the manager came down on a Sunday. We were in the living room in the Farriers; there was me, mother, Uncle Ted and Auntie Mable. I had virtually nothing to say while they spoke together.

“It was left that he’d let me know next week for definite. The real reason I didn’t want to go was because I’d just started courting Jen; my wife. There was no way I'd see her because I’d be at Stoke for six days every week. My parents didn’t know but that was going through my head, and I’ve always told her that.

“Ted said it’s good money but you could do better than that. Auntie Mable didn’t want me to go at all as she was very close to me. I phoned and said ‘no, I’m not coming’.”

Not many have had such an adventurous trip to Stoke as John. Coming close to playing against a future legend, and turning down a chance to play there, the young man returned to Worcester.

“After that I went to City. Some of the players they were bringing in were big names. They brought in Roy Paul the season after he captained Manchester City in the FA Cup final. The next season he comes to Worcester, so it’s a funny old game.”

John was joining a squad that were about to embark on some amazing FA Cup runs. But before all that, he had to start at the bottom.

 “I played for the colts and then they stuck me in the reserves.

“In fact in 1951 I played for the colts, the reserves and the firsts. I got the record for 100 games consecutive because I was quite strong and didn’t get injured in the early days. They started to come about towards the latter stages of my career.

“I got injured badly in a practice match. My own goalkeeper came out to get the ball and kicked me in a very delicate place. I was stretchered off and it took a month to only get it right. I lost my place in the first team but when I eventually played – I think it was Boxing Day – we played Coventry city A in the reserves in Warwick. It was a horrible day, thick mud and came to over your boots almost. My leg must have got stuck in the mud, a wing half came in and went straight through me. My tibia and fibula were gone and I went straight to Warwick Hospital.

“They set the leg and I came back home after a month. They then re-set it. I was bow legged and would have had one leg shorter than the other so they had to keep working on it. Anyway, in all that time, Worcester were playing and doing well and they got to Liverpool in the FA Cup.”

That meant John was despairingly unavailable for the encounter. But despite not playing the 90 minutes, he did come out of it with a story, as seemed the case for everything he did.

“The Daily Mail came to the hospital, and wanted to take pictures of me with headphones on listening to the match. They got there and the match was cancelled.

“It was put to the next week and because they were only at the hospital that day they fiddled with it. They took all the photographs and I had to do all the acting: ‘oh they scored’, ‘oh they haven’t scored.’ When it came to the actual match the Mail put in one of these pictures; it was all supposed to be live. I can say they all used to fiddle with it in those days too.”

He chuckles at his last remark. It was an amusing tale to say the least, something the current Mail staff probably don’t have a clue about. John knew it was a good story and admitted it himself. The man deserved some sort of action considering he was out of the match.

But the time would come when he did get to be part of a great cup run. Biscuits digested, I sat back for another cracker.

“What happened was we went to Aldershot having played a lot of cup games. We got down there and drew, and then they came up to City to play and we were losing until the last minute of the game when Harry Knowles equalised – I think it was a penalty and we drew 2-2.

“Harry Knowles was a very rough player. I was rough but he was diabolical. He upset people in every match; whoever was around him would get the same treatment. He head butted one of their full backs and put him on the floor. The papers didn’t like it much and used the headline ‘skull-duggery’.”

In those days, penalty shoot-outs didn’t decide games. After extra time, there would be another game. For the third match, Worcester City vs. Aldershot was played at St. Andrews, the home of Birmingham City FC.

“We went to St. Andrews, Birmingham City’s ground, and it was the most memorable match for me. 23,000 people were watching and we should have scored lots early on, but we ended up losing in extra time. In terms of the match I can hardly remember anything in detail.

“My biggest memory of that was I’d had a slight injury to my chest before the tie and they strapped me up to play in the game. It kept my chest solid and it was hurting a bit. Bill Jones said I had to play; there were no ifs and buts in those days.

“I came up the tunnel and I’d never heard a roar like it. It was a complete blur for me. That was the biggest memory for me, just the sheer fascination of the occasion.”

“I think you can see I’m quite nervous anyway and I get worked up, so the match was a blur. But when the ball came in I would clear it and I had a good game.

“Again I’m not bragging but I always seemed to have a good game. They never dropped me at the City, not until later on. But I played in every game that was available. I remember the crowds certainly.”

Another hallmark of John’s was his England Youth cap, which was obviously one of his proudest moments, as it would be anybody.

A player who reaches international level at any age is worthy of the call-up and clearly a great talent.

“My England youth cap was amazing because I didn’t even know. A fella came into the Farriers and said he’d heard it on the wireless saying ‘your John’s playing for England. My mother said ‘no you’re kidding’ but the guy explained what he had heard. We then got the letter – so you can see they took a long time to come.”

John was like the rest, except he had the funny story.

“After the match everyone was buzzing around. There was a small table round the dressing room and one of the trainers stuck a cardboard box on it. Those who had played for England before knew what was going on and they rushed to the box, put their hands in and out came a cap.

“Well I’m standing back and when there was room I got in and there was nothing in there. They were one short but eventually they sent it through the post and I got my international cap. Those are my only memories of those sorts of matches.”

But was it the most precious thing John took part in?

“No. I don’t know why but I only enjoyed playing for the City, I didn’t really want to go far-a-field.”

If you’re painting a picture, you’d have to fit in admirable and loyal traits. John is still a local lad to this day, and wouldn’t want it any other way.

John had already mentioned his beginnings in the game, but such a sporty lad must have had some inherited gene lying within. That’s when we got to Fred Wheldon.

“My grandfather was born in Small Heath, Birmingham. He played first for Small Heath, who later became Birmingham City. He was transferred to Aston Villa for £100, and he played there for a number of years including the 1896/97 season when they won the double event – the league and the cup in the same year.

“They had a special medal for the double event, so in total they got three medals. He also played cricket for Worcestershire towards the end of his career. He had a pub in Worcester then they bought a pub in Farrier Street called the Farriers Arms.”

Football and cricket; the similarities were endless.

John continued: “All the family lived there, including my mother and me when I was born. The Farriers Arms was the nucleus of everything that happened to me and it was due to Fred Wheldon that I was able to do what I did.

“His son Ted Wheldon had letters for Liverpool but because of the Farriers – and my grandmother - he was the brewer so couldn’t go. There were others in the family who were sportsmen, two other uncles but as far as I’m concerned, the 1897 picture of my granddad is my favourite. (John points to Aston Villa’s double winning team picture).

“I’ve read about his Villa career in the books and that but I haven’t really studied it.”

As we wind down the conversation, John has already dashed to the loo twice. We break for a few minutes every now and again to talk about other issues, and one thing I was desperate to ask was about training sessions.

In the modern Premier league era – which John admitted he didn’t like because of all the shirt pulling and diving – there are modern facilities and techniques to structure weeks and weeks of intense training. How different that was at Worcester City in the 50’s.

“Every Tuesday and Thursday we met. There were no floodlights in the early days; just a lamp outside the dressing room, so there was no real football played, it was just running.

“So all you did was run and because the City ground was near the canal, we used to run alongside it in pitch black. The “trainers” were quite old men and mainly did the boots, and they didn’t really do any training. They used to ride behind us on bicycles. We got back and had a big communal bath and that was the end of the training.”

There came a time when John had to leave his beloved City. Although he didn’t retire just yet, his career would never be the same at a different club.

“I was very sad to leave the City. I never told anybody, I just bluffed it out saying I’ll be fine at Kidderminster Harriers. But I would have loved to have stayed at the City. Some books said that money was tight so they had to get rid of me, not that they wanted to. All the nice things were said, but the bottom line is you’re sacked.”

“When I was a little boy growing up in the Farriers and because of the connections with the Villa, there used to be a pub in St. Johns, the Grosvenor’s Arms. Old Frank Moss owned it first – he played for England and the Villa – then his sons Amos and Frank JR.

“As I was growing up at the Farriers because of the connection between the Moss’s and the Wheldon’s at the two pubs, Amos used to come to the Farriers to meet Ted Wheldon (his eldest son). Ted said he’d take me on Pitch Croft for a bit of training and coaching from Amos Moss.

“So they took me down and brought a blue jersey. Amos gave it to me and said this was my dad’s change when he played for Scotland when they played against the five wee devils (the Scots front line, small but very good). This was Alan Morton’s blue international shirt and he gave it to me.

“I was so proud of it and I wore it every time I went to Pitch Croft to play football, which was everyday if I could, or straight after school or whatever. I wore it all through my childhood.

“Moving on, after City I went to Kiddie and who should be player coach when I arrive. Amos Moss, the fella who gave me the jersey when I was a boy. We played together in my first season there; he was left half and I was centre half. We had an OK side, but like all teams in those days at the end of the season – whatever non-league team you were – they cleared half of them out.”

Before we finished on the current City, we touched on an itchy subject that comes up in football every week: referees.

“Referees never used to have cards, they just used to warn players early on. Any more than that and you’re off. But there never was any more and I never played in a game where anyone was sent off, never. I was only warned twice, and that was wrong.

“Football referees should be just like the rugby officials. You respect what they do and that’s the way it should be. I think now it’s just crept into the game where nobody respects the referee. They shouldn’t be allowed to go up in groups to the ref.

“Maybe they aren’t that good. In my day the heavy ball and the slow wet muddy pitches helped the referee. It slowed the game down so much compared to today so the referee was able to get involved in the actual playing area.

“Be like the rugby and have a sin bin. Have the electrical goal line technology like the cricket and a television referee to say there’s a goal or just before they do or don’t send someone off; have someone watching it, just help them out.”

And what of John’s former side in the present day?

“I hope they don’t but they could easily go bust because they’re in a difficult situation. But I look at the gates compared to other teams in their division and they do quite well for attendances.

“The supporters club put thousands and thousands of pounds into the club in my day and they could get that back. But because of the money the players get today, they’re never going to be able afford to get really good players.

“Therefore they need a benefactor like Cecil Duckworth did for Worcester Rugby Club; to come in and push them along money wise.

“If they don’t get that, I can’t see them surviving. I hope they get this new ground, and there’s been reports in the paper about a pre-fabricated plan; cheap this cheap that just to get a ground.

“They’re dedicated people down there and the real fans wouldn’t like to see them going under, neither would I. But without money now there isn’t much chance. If somebody came in and bought the ground and let’s say rents it rent free to the city for 20 years or whatever, that type of person would be the owner of the area for that 20 years, which in time would go up in value. But I can’t see anybody around who would do that.”

“The sad thing is, when I was down there, Worcester was one of the richest clubs in the non-league and everybody wanted to go and play there. Worcester paid almost double the wages of other clubs.

“There isn’t much money down there nowadays, and money talks.”

Indeed money does talk, but it doesn’t come close to talking a better game than John.