One man’s floor is another man’s ceiling. For John Williams that is certainly the case, having played for a total of 22 clubs and on the way wasting absolutely no time sitting on the substitutes bench. It is a mantra John came up with himself and carried with him from the non-league scene with Cradley Town through to the inception of the Premier League in 1992, where his 88 appearances for Coventry City saw him play against some of footballs greats.

Birmingham born and bred, John will never forget his roots. But how did he elevate himself from Cradley to the professional game?

“Cradley Town was a team that generated a hell of a lot of good talent. We had some experienced professionals and four players who were quite exceptional, including me. We had a lad called John Ford, Andy McFarlane and we had a lad called Alan Nicholls who was one of the best goalkeepers I can honestly say I played with, god rest his soul.

“We played against some teams that were well respected and in much higher divisions, and we pummelled a lot of them. Our pitch wasn’t the best, it was on a slope but we had untold people coming.

“We sort of shook up the football world at that time; I think we were just a bunch of freaks, these four players at one team making it professional from a side that’s literally nowhere is quite unusual and it was certainly a good time back then.”

Coming out of non-league, John’s first league club was surprisingly for him in Wales, where he played for Swansea City.

“That was a surprise. Cradley played Swansea in a pre-season game; West Brom, Birmingham, Stoke – they all came to watch us. One told me I was too thin, one said I was too raw; everyone’s got their opinion, I don’t hold any grudges.

“I’m just very grateful and thankful that Frank Burrows, who’s a great mentor, like a father figure to me, gave me the opportunity to start my league career at Swansea.”

John is a likeable man who exudes a chatty and laid-back personality. As he sipped on his tonic water and lime – the big man was off the drink at the time – he explained the difference between non-league and professional football.

“In the non-league scene, everything was team-orientated and included a bonding ethic, which is the complete opposite when compared to what I was used to in the higher echelons of the league.

“It was completely different; it was more self-involved and more or less looking after yourself, but I can honestly say that the clubs I’ve been at, there’s always been a bond because that was the era that we were playing in.

“We lived and died as a team; it was of that culture. We all went out together, we all sort of socialised and stayed together in a group, and that way we had a bond on the pitch as well as off it. It was good times for me.”

Many who read about John’s career will take up the stereotypical viewpoint that he moved from club to club because he wasn’t good enough to have a prolonged stay at one side. But most importantly for John, he understood that wherever there was a chance to play, he wanted to go.

John explained his theory behind moving from club to club.

“My philosophy is why be a squad player when you should be in the team. I was a bit unfortunate because when new managers came in they wanted to bring their own players in. If you look at all the clubs I’ve been at, whether in two or three months that I’ve been there; new changeover, they want to bring their own players in.

“I don’t want to be part of someone’s squad; I want to be in someone’s team. So the opportunity came about where I could go on loan or I could go to another team. It’s not so much about loyalty, it furthered my career – people knew that I wasn’t afraid to play for other teams in different parts of the country.

“You can show loyalty to a club and never play a game, you could play ten games in ten years. I wanted to play as many games as I could because I enjoyed playing football, I was a sociable character and I love the game.”

Such words are inspiring and central to John’s ethos.

Another trait that took John to the higher echelons of football was his speed. John was a natural athlete with pace to burn. Growing up in a tough area and working hard for his parents, John was never in doubt as to what decision to make when given the chance to win £10,000 in the Sprint Cup Challenge at Wembley in 1992, which preceded the Rumbelow’s League Cup Final.

“At every club there were regional races. The red hot favourite was Kevin Bartlett who did it in 11.40 at Molineux. Every team has their fast players; some players are built for distance, a lot of footballers aren’t built for 100m.

“Me, I was quite tall, ungainly and I sort of got quicker as I went on rather than when I started off. I could certainly go through the gears. But the more shorter players like your Michael Gilkes and your Adrian Littlejohn’s – players from that era – they were very explosive, quick off the mark like your Theo Walcott’s of today and your Agbonlahor’s; short, powerful, sprinter-built.

“I was more of your Usain Bolt if you like to sort of compare, and coming from the inner-cities of Birmingham where I grew up, knowing that there was £10,000 on offer, there was no way I was going to let that go.”

John couldn’t quite emulate Bolt’s world-record time despite admitting they were very similar, but he won the race in an impressive 11.49 seconds. Watching the video, it amazed and amused me that he was the single runner to not start out of the blocks in athletic stance. While others around him crouched as if there were starter blocks beneath them, John bent over slightly like you would if starting the lawnmower on a Sunday afternoon, but seconds later he was Sprint Challenge champion and picking up the big cheque.

Is that why he is known as the “flying postman”?

“That came later in my career through a commentator who was at Wycombe Wanderers when I was there, Alan Parry. He made a joke about me delivering letters and he said ‘oh, I bet there were never any late deliveries on his round’, and ever since he made that comment it just sort of ballooned and it went on from there.”

John’s final league side was Kidderminster Harriers. The striker didn’t last long there, but he did leave with a special memory and one which he believed should have earned him a new contract.

“For me I saw the writing on the wall. I was at Kidderminster on a non-contract for twelve months. I put revenue in their pockets scoring an absolute wonderful goal against Wolves which nearly took us to the next round in the FA Cup. I think it got the club something like £1million in revenue which paid for their lights.

“We signed a new player - I can’t remember his name - but he came in on the Friday and took my place on the Saturday.

“Being the professional that I am I never said a word, I got on with my job. It was 0-0 up until the 70th minute and Jan Molby said to me, ‘Go on Willo, go and make a name for yourself’.

“I went on, the ball came across; I remember Michael Oakes was in goal and Jody Craddock was the nearest player to me. I took a touch and turned at the same time and buried the ball in the bottom corner. The whole place just erupted, all the lads jumped on me but in the 89th minute Alex Rae scored one of the best goals I’ve ever seen at that ground, out of nothing, which took us back to Molineux.

“I still didn’t play, and to me that was when the writing was on the wall and I knew I’d never get a contract.”

John wasn’t surprised or shocked when he returned to non-league football in his 30’s. From playing with some of the best, he went to Bath City after his Harriers career couldn’t be negotiated.

“Coventry all came snowballing at a very early age. It was the new Premier League and I was really excited to be playing against some of the best players in the world at that time. It was a tough league. The likes of Alan Shearer, Eric Cantona, Matt Le Tissier; there were too many to mention – Roy Keane, Stuart Pearce. All these players were big names and I just wanted to sort of see how good I really was.

“But football has got a tendency to disappoint. A verbal contract isn’t worth the paper it’s written on. ‘36 years old, casualty of football, you’re too old rather than we don’t want to pay you’. That came into play; I wasn’t bitter, I shook the hands with the people that promised me the deal and I went to Bath City.

“I had a massive contract there, not much different to the one I had at Kidderminster, and it just shows how poor Kidderminster were if Bath could pay me the same wages that they were paying me.”

Such a statement sounds bitter, but it was just John’s rightful opinion of the two clubs. Whilst at Bath, John started reaching out to other things aside from playing the game.

“My parents always told me to go and work, so while I was playing part time football for Bath, I went to work for a school in Birmingham. I was contemplating whether to be a PE teacher or not and I finally realised being confined in a space wasn’t for me.

“I need to be in a field and out there amongst people; like a free spirit. So I soon packed that in and started to work with disadvantaged kids who have been in care. A lot of the kids that I knew growing up had had horrendous upbringings similar to this, and I thought it’s about time I gave a little something back and that’s the sort of field that I went in to.”

Explaining his off-field work was proof that John was desperate to help out the disabled and disadvantaged in any way he could.

“I help the system with food shopping, cooking, just basically life skills. If they need to go to the dentists or doctors we help them with that. If they need to move on we help them go to houses to get forms signed. We basically get them back into the normal swing of things after they’ve been in care for 16, 17 years. I do that on a voluntary basis.”

As if that wasn’t enough, there is also the small art of football coaching.

“Ability is nothing without hard work. The things clubs and coaches are looking for now are far different to what they were looking for when I was playing.

“A lot of the kids don’t know what to expect when they get into football. They don’t know that managers play games that could destroy your career, so you have to be mentally strong as well as talented on the pitch.

“If you get left out you have to know how to bounce back and get over it. My career lasted 13 years – some kids, they’ll be on two, three grand a week for two years and then they’re out of a job. I try and help them to look for things that they can’t see, because as far as they’re concerned they’ve got the God given right to be playing, and we all know that you haven’t got a God given right to do anything.”

John has also been lucky enough to play Masters Football for Coventry City, but unfortunately picked up the only bad injury of his career whilst playing with the old boys. But that hasn’t deterred him.

“I’ve got physio later”, he says with a laugh.

“If I can get my leg back, I can get back to playing charity matches which gives a little bit of something back. I breathe, eat, sleep football. I do love it, and nothing is going to stop me from doing that.

“I give advice to so many players I don’t want to mention, even some players who are still in the Premier League phone me up for advice. I do what I can to help anyone who wants to better their lives.”

As John made his way out of the Drop Forge restaurant in Birmingham – our meeting place for the afternoon - I was pondering something. Who were the Premier League players calling him for advice? But that thought was soon dispelled when I came to my own conclusion; why wouldn’t they call upon such a thoughtful and gracious person.