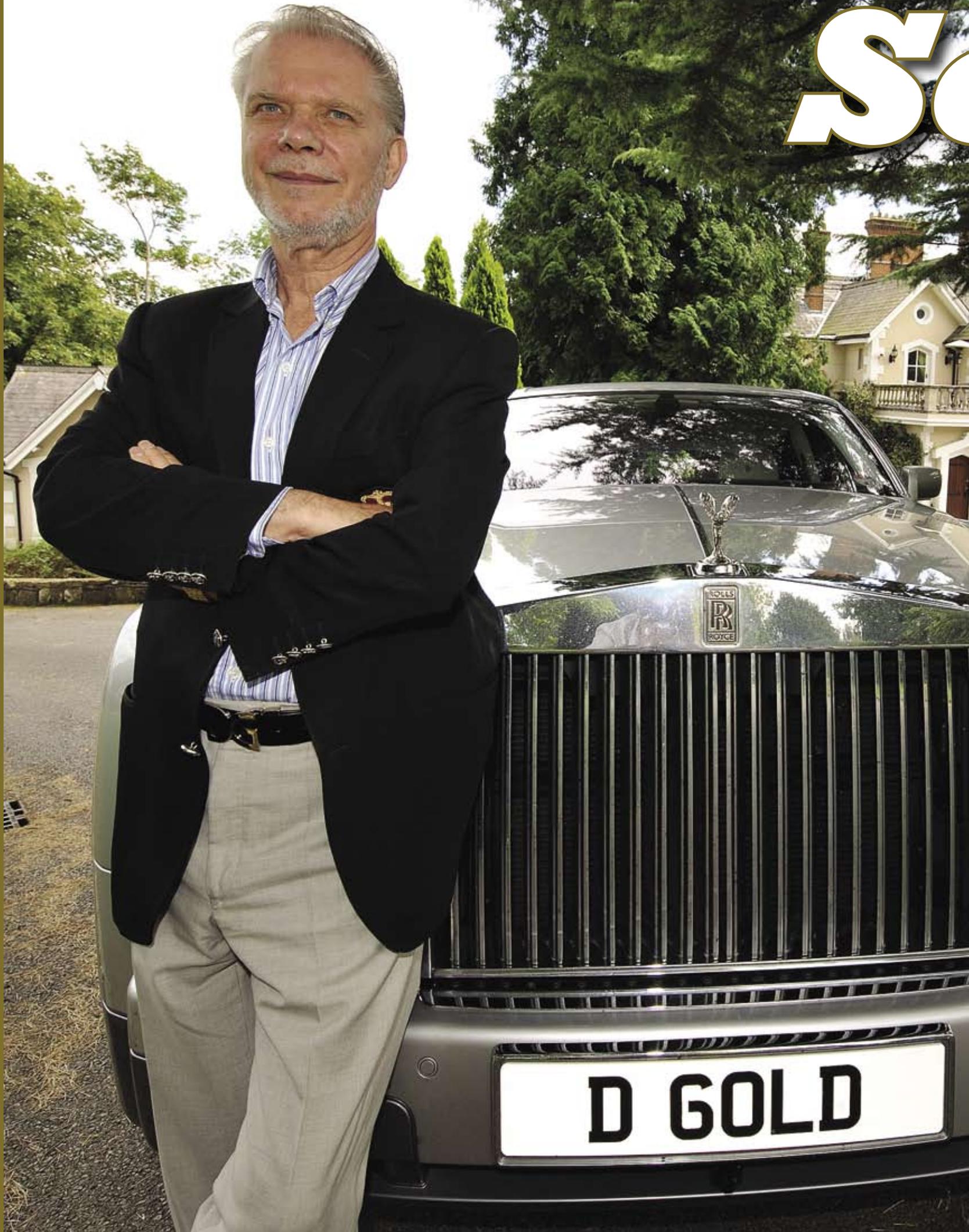


**MR CHAIRMAN**

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# GOLD

After his dream of playing for West Ham turned sour, Birmingham chairman David Gold embarked on the ultimate rags-to-riches journey. But what motivates the self-made millionaire to maintain his prodigious work ethic? That's easy...

Words: Richard Lenton. Photography: Pete Goding

**"I**'m terrified of being poor again," insists David Gold. "Up until a few years ago I had a recurring nightmare where I'd lose all my money. I'd be back at Green Street in the East End, my mum would be in her pinny, but bizarrely I'd still be driving my Bentley. I'd go to the boot and get my tool bag, my spirit level, and then I'm on the scaffold again with Terry Green and Ben The Hod. Because the dream's associated with being cold and wet, which is how I always was back in the East End of London. I'd wake up cold and wet where the dream had made me perspire so much. It was horrible, really horrible."

As I drive through the gates to David Gold's impressive personal empire in the Surrey countryside, it's obvious that the credit crunch will have to bite with the viciousness of a HGH-addicted pitbull for the Birmingham City chairman to return to his poverty stricken roots.

A brand new Rolls Royce with personalised number plate proudly guards the garage door, while a helicopter sits just to the side of the 18th green of his back garden golf course. And when I say 'back garden golf course', I don't mean a measly pitch 'n' putt - although that would be impressive enough - but a bona fide 19-hole track which incorporates one of the longest holes in Surrey. The 602-yard 13th also doubles up as a runway for his beloved Cessna, although the fairway bunker had to be removed after David's flirtation with a sandy grave following a less than textbook landing.

His house is equally impressive; large but warm, homely and anything but ostentatious. A grand piano sits at the far end of the reception room. "I did start having lessons but it wasn't for me, so I got the next best thing, one that plays itself," says David.

His is the ultimate rags to riches tale; it's the story of a man who's risen from the depths of poverty and ill-health to build an extensive business empire worth millions, yet he remains a thoroughly decent, likeable guy.

He's indulged in a sometimes torrid love

affair with football all his life. As a teenager, his estranged father kyboshed his dreams of stardom by refusing to sign the apprenticeship forms he'd been offered by his beloved West Ham, and his 15-year stint in the St Andrews boardroom has encompassed multiple promotions, relegations and cup finals. David leads me into his drawing room, which looks like any other, until I notice a familiar looking trophy on the sideboard. It's the oldest existing FA Cup, and cost David a cool half a million quid...

**I suppose this is the nearest you'll ever get to winning the FA Cup with Birmingham City, David... what's the story?**

Lord Kinnaird was a great player in the 1890s. He then became chairman of the FA and when he retired in 1914 they gave him this cup. After his death, his family put it away in a vault in Scotland where it stayed for nearly a hundred years. When it suddenly came up for sale in 2005, you had Germans and Americans bidding for it, but I didn't see anyone from the FA, the Premier League or the PFA there. The PFA saw fit to buy a Lowry painting for two million quid a few years ago, yet they weren't bidding for it [the cup]. We shouldn't be ignoring bits of heritage like that, so I got embroiled in it, then pride got involved. I didn't think it was right for it to go out of the country, and I just felt I had to stand up and be counted.

**From the past to the present; how hard is it to run a club these days if your name's not Roman Abramovich, or you're not a multi-billionaire Middle Eastern Sheikh?**

Abramovich has made it more difficult because he raised the bar. When he came into the business, things were just starting to settle down financially in football. Common sense was creeping in, people weren't going potty on wages and transfer fees because they'd seen what had happened to Leeds. Leeds is like a Sword of Damocles hanging over football. But then two things happened - Abramovich came

**“YOU’LL SEE A PLAYER KISSING HIS BADGE AND THE AGENT KISSING HIS WALLET, THEN A YEAR LATER, ALL OF A SUDDEN, THIS CLUB ISN’T FOR MY PLAYER - IT’S TIME FOR HIM TO MOVE ON”**

*‘You’ve got the power to know, you’re indestructable...’*



in and made it difficult for all the clubs below him who had to chase him by spending big, which also means charging big. Then there was the huge new TV deal with Sky, which means that fans can sit at home and watch fantastic football – the Premier League is the best league in the world. But if the kids are at home because their father can’t afford to take them to Accrington Stanley, and they sit and watch Arsenal v Chelsea, then they’ll become fans of Chelsea or Arsenal, and Accrington will lose that fan forever. If the dad takes him to Accrington, bingo, we know kids gravitate to the club they’re watching. We’re ignoring the fans at our peril.

**So how can football help the fans?**

Individual clubs can’t reduce the prices. If we as an individual club reduce the prices, we’ll get relegated. I’ll fill my stadium but take less money than my competitor who’s now richer than me and can afford that centre-forward we wanted. But I’d like to see the institutions forcing it upon football clubs to reduce prices via legislation. Whatever money goes into football goes straight out; it goes to players, agents, on transfer fees, in wages. Where does it not go? To the fans. That’s where I feel like I’m spitting in the wind. Every time I raise the issue, people nod off because they don’t care.

**Fans think they can run clubs. How soon would they change their minds if they took the reins?**

Us fans all believe that we can run clubs - we’re all chasing dreams. I thought it was going to be easy, but it took me about a week to realise that all my beliefs as a fan were unworkable. I still read all the letters the fans send to the local paper, and I think that maybe we as clubs should be addressing them. Fans say things like ‘they’ve no ambition’ or ‘they need to spend money’, and maybe the PR departments in clubs should say, ‘okay, we’ll reply to everything and explain’. The only problem with that is that it’s never ending. For me, the most extraordinary organisation that’s floundered for years is the FA, because what you’ve basically got is a couple of hundred fans running a business.

**What’s the worst thing a fan’s said to you?**

I’ve got a great relationship with the fans

because I am one. I’ve jumped up a couple of times and shouted ‘sack the board, sack the board’, then realised I am the board!

**What’s the worst thing that’s happened to you during your time in football?**

There’s nothing so depressing as relegation; it tears the heart out of you. I’ve been through it three times, and each time I’ve been devastated. I’ve not been able to watch football or even talk about it, it’s awful. But each time I’ve bounced back, because relegation can also be a fantastic opportunity. I remember the first time I was relegated with Barry Fry as manager, I was inconsolable, but then a couple of days later I woke up and rang him straight away. I said, ‘Barry, I want you to go out and buy Kevin Francis’, who was a huge striker from Stockport. I said, ‘in this division he’ll tear them apart. I want you to win the division, I want the trophy in the cabinet, and I want you to win the Auto Windscreens Shield and take us to Wembley. I want a fantastic day, I want to stand in the middle of the stadium and take it all in’. He said, ‘is that

all chairman? Because it’s 6am and I’d like to go back to bed’! So, from devastation to a renewed enthusiasm can happen just like that. You think of the new challenges and potential new rewards. You have to be optimistic.

**Was there anything different when you were relegated at the end of last season?**

Yes. On the previous occasions, the fans were still with the board. This time they weren’t; there was a degree of ferocity. With 20 minutes to go in our final game, Reading were 3-0 up so we knew we were down. The whole stadium knew and had time to fester on it. For an hour during and after the match, I felt that maybe I’d done all I could and it was time to resign. But I knew I had one more thing to do, and that was to face more than a thousand people at the end of season dinner the next evening. I thought about going sick, but I had to go. However, you’re hoping that the floor opens up and you disappear. When fans turn on you and you see hatred in their eyes, it’s awful, and these fans were only going to be six feet away from me. As a businessman, I was thinking ‘if more than 50 per cent are against me, then really that’s the casting vote. I don’t want to be where I’m not wanted’. But it all changed when I got there. The fans were supportive and absolutely fantastic. One guy came over to me late in the evening – I suspect he’d had a drop or two of Dutch courage – and said, ‘I hope you didn’t see me in the crowd, because I was one of those berating you. This is my son; I hope my father and grandfather weren’t looking down and seeing my outrageous behaviour’. He had the guts to apologise which I thought was great.



**BIRMINGHAM CITY RECORDS**

- Record Transfer Fee Paid:** £6.25m to Liverpool for Emile Heskey, May 2004
- Record Transfer Fee Received:** £6.5m from Liverpool for Jermaine Pennant, August 2006
- Most Appearances:** Gil Merrick (1946-59), 551
- Most Goals:** Joe Bradford (1920-35), 267
- Biggest League Win:** 12-0 v Walsall Town Swifts (1892) and Doncaster Rovers (1903)
- Biggest League Defeat:** 9-1 v Blackburn Rovers (1895) and Sheffield Wednesday (1930)
- Youngest Player:** Trevor Francis v Cardiff, September 1970, 16 years, 139 days
- Oldest Player:** Dennis Jennings v Wolves, May 1950, 39 years, 290 days





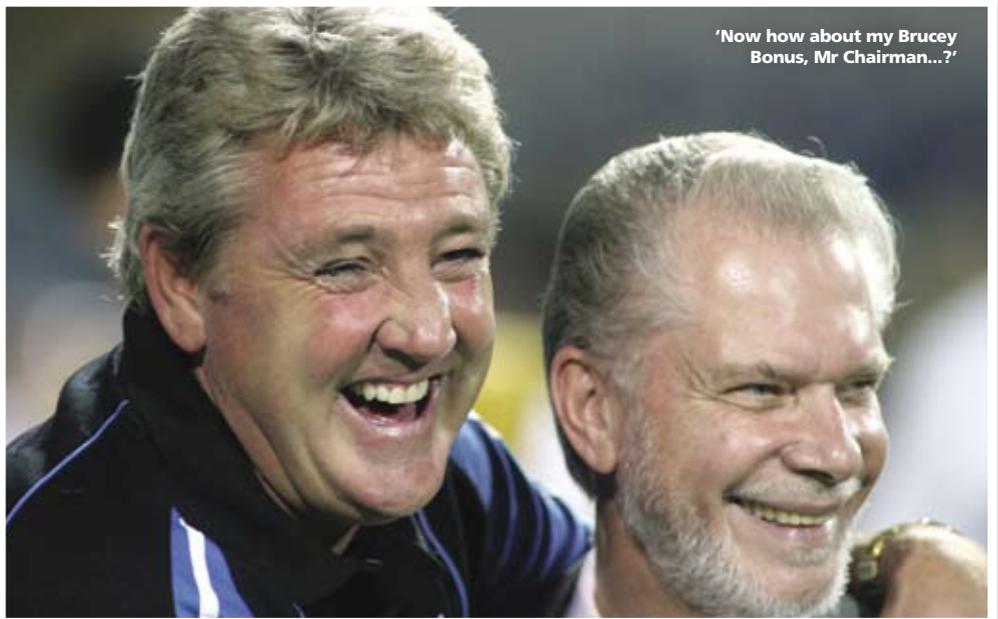
### How do you view agents?

Players and agents believe there are no limits. You are constantly bombarded by players' ever increasing demands, and it's agents who are driving it. Agents will be all over you to sign their player on a four-year contract. You'll see the player kissing his badge and the agent kissing his wallet, then a year later, all of a sudden, 'this club isn't for my player – it's time for him to move on'. The only reason is because the player will go off and kiss the badge of the next club, and the agent will kiss his wallet again. The only loyalty is to the paymaster, but I don't think there's any way to change it. You would move on to the next project if someone doubled your wages. What clubs and fans have to do is enjoy the moment of success when it comes and learn to live with that reality.

### Do you feel that agents are solely to blame for the huge amounts of money in football? Or are fans culpable as well?

We're all to blame, including the fans. They write their letters to the papers saying that their club isn't ambitious enough, and then when they start to become ambitious you get into a Dutch auction with another club who want to move on to the next level themselves. It's all in an effort to fulfil their dreams.

This isn't business, this is the pursuit of dreams. So when you go the extra mile, the players' demands go up and that's what drives it. 'One more player, chairman, we'll get into Europe'. 'One more player, chairman, we'll avoid relegation'. I'm sure the phrase 'one more player, chairman' is going to be on my tombstone.



'Now how about my Brucey Bonus, Mr Chairman...?'

### Has money now changed the game of football beyond all recognition?

People didn't think the £1m transfer would ever happen – like the four-minute mile, but it did. When it did, nobody ever thought there would be a £5m transfer – never, ever, ever, then it goes to £10m, £20m. Where is the end? Who is responsible for the upward spiral? It's us, buying our Sky boxes, paying £9.99 to watch a match. We're pumping money in and it's going to players and players' agents. We have to look in the mirror from time to time. Going to watch football is an expensive business now. Where are the kids? The only time I see kids at a football match is at Birmingham when we do 'A Kid For A Quid' promotion.

### You're obviously a hugely passionate football fan. Is that why you've tended to give your managers a little more time than is given at other clubs?

Actually, I didn't give Barry Fry enough time. I sacked him, and it's one of my great regrets in football. Every time I see him, I apologise. Even to this day, whenever I can help Barry I will do, he's a great pal. But Barry is the only manager we really ever sacked. Trevor (Francis) left by mutual agreement; he had run out of steam after five-and-a-half years. Of course, poor Trevor will go down as the nearly man. He went to a couple of cup finals with Sheffield Wednesday, three play-offs with us, and a League Cup final which we lost to Liverpool when he was a referee's decision away from winning it. The ref went to blow for a penalty after a foul on AJ (Andy Johnson), then took the whistle away. The only person in the world who didn't think it was a penalty was the ref. Even 35,000 Liverpool fans couldn't believe it.

### What about Steve Bruce?

Fans and the media thought he'd gone past his sell by date after we were relegated from the Premier League. I remember going down into his room when we lost 1-0 to Norwich, and we were only about seventh in the Championship, but unlike Trevor, when I looked at Steve and said, 'Are you up for this? It's gonna be tough'. He said, 'Yes chairman, I'm up for the fight, and I still believe we'll get promoted'. He did what he said he'd do.

### How do you feel about his departure now?

I feel like I've lost a friend and I'm not sure why.

I understood why he left, because of the insecurity that he felt; the insecurity of not knowing who his boss was – whether it was the Birmingham board as it existed or Carson Yeung. They were troubled times. Every week there was another headline - 'Club in Crisis' and all the rest of it, so it was very difficult, and the situation wasn't of his making. He did a fantastic job for Birmingham City, and I don't feel that he left us in the lurch. I understood why he took that fantastic offer from Wigan, it was a hell of a deal. But why it's acrimonious between us, I fail to understand. I hope that one day we can meet up, shake hands and have a beer.

### Despite all you've achieved in business, do you still regret not signing for your beloved West Ham when you had the chance?

I regret it nearly every day. I still dream of scoring the winning goal at Wembley for West Ham. I was asked by the great Ted Fenton to sign as an apprentice and it didn't happen, but here I am. I've been probably the most fortunate person on the planet of football, in that having failed when so close, which millions did, I've still got a great life in football.

On my first day at a Premier League meeting with those other 19 chairmen at Stapleford Park in Leicestershire, with my helicopter parked outside on the lawn, I remember thinking, 'Bloody hell, I'm here'.

### Do you still have any mixed feelings and divided loyalties these days when Birmingham play the Hammers?

The first time was tough. It was 1993, West Ham were trying to get in the Premier League and needed to win, and we needed to win to try and avoid relegation with two games to go. We were winning 1-0 with three minutes left, but then they drew level and won it with the last kick of the game. I felt absolutely devastated for City, but could still feel pleasure and joy for West Ham. I remember seeing their chairman, Terry Brown, in the boardroom, and saying, 'well done Terry, I hope that gets you promoted'.

Thankfully we ended up winning our last game of the season against Charlton to stay up. But since then, although I want them to do well, and I always look to see how they're getting on, when we're playing them there's no ambiguity any more. I want to beat them.