DIFFERENT CLASS

DERMOT KAVANAGH

unbound

large reproduction painting of gondolas in Venice bought by Elias took pride of place in the living room, above vases of flowers and a collection of ornaments and decorative plates that were supplemented in later years with Laurie's trophies and medals.

Cunningham had a similar character to his father. Softly spoken and introverted as a young boy, he was a natural when it came to any sporting activity. At Pooles Park Primary School he excelled at running – both sprinting and longer distance – and was singled out as an exceptional hurdler by his games teacher. His natural fitness and native ability gave him a self-belief that he wore lightly. Mavis recalls his easy-going way and lack of arrogance when it came to his athletic talent, which he never exploited in the playground: 'He wasn't the kind of person that really go around showing up these things,' she reflects. A sensitive and imaginative boy, he possessed artistic skill which he expressed in differing ways. Mavis recalls with pride a painting he brought home one day from primary school: 'Drawing was something that he loved. I remember he'd drawn an old man and his teacher asked him, "Who is it?" and he said, "I don't know, I just draw this old man." It was really good, I've still got it hung up in my house.' Years later in a cover article for the *Sunday Times Magazine* in 1976, the doyen of football writers, Brian Glanville – a man not easily impressed – commented on the picture on display in the family home, 'On the Cunninghams' wall there hangs a strikingly well-observed portrait of an old man, painted by Laurie.'

He liked music too and had an affinity with the piano, which he taught himself to play at an early age. As in most

Jamaican households music was an integral part of daily life and an essential element at social gatherings such as wedding parties, christenings and birthdays. And where there was music, there was dancing. Given his propensities it is not hard to imagine the young Cunningham, with his casual grace, thriving in such a creative domestic environment. Mavis recalls: 'He loved dancing, he loved music. I bought him two pianos you know. I bought him one that was electrical when he was younger, then when he was older, I bought him a very big one, a stand-up one.' Returning to the theme of his love of all things sporty she adds, 'He was really good at swimming. I didn't really know he was so good at football until his teacher wrote to me and asked me to come and see. He kept telling me how good he was at football and swimming, if it wasn't football, I think it would be swimming.' It is interesting to note this relaxed versatility was apparent at such an early age, and it continued to be a character trait throughout his later life. Even as a young boy he found great pleasure in a variety of pursuits, all of which he mastered quite naturally without the need for much instruction from the adults around him.

The Cunningham brothers although close throughout their lives went in different directions early on. Keith the eldest by two years naturally looked out for his younger brother but the boys had very different temperaments. They attended Sunday school at St Mary's Church on Hornsey Rise together, and joined the Boys' Brigade where they took part in gymnastics and played in the marching band. Keith was quick to anger with a rebellious streak that got him expelled from primary school and led him into trouble with the police as a teenager that culminated in a prison sentence – but he

says his brother never judged him even when he become famous. He recalls: 'He never ever said one bad word about me. We never had a rivalry, we rarely argued, it wasn't like that. As little boys we used to share the bed and he'd wet it and I woke up soaking wet, so I used to get annoyed by that. He never hung his clothes up properly. I was tidy, he was messy ... He matured mentally, football just came to him out of the blue really, he just melted into it all of a sudden. We both went to training but I didn't stick to it, I was doing my own thing by then. He loved what he was doing but he didn't big it up.'

Living in an area that was often harsh for black teenagers, Keith sums up the filial differences between the two boys when he states, 'He studied and played his football ... I went a different way.' He recalls one formative experience when the family were living in Trinder Road. The brothers were playing in the playground of a white council estate that was considered a no-go area for black children, and as soon as they were spotted by a group of local boys they were chased back home through the streets. Arriving breathless and agitated at the front door their father asked what was up and when Keith explained he insisted that Keith go back outside and fight the ringleader.

Finsbury Park had few recreational spaces compared to other, leafier London boroughs. The best places for informal football kick-abouts were Finsbury Park itself or Highgate Wood. The effects of bomb damage from the war were still visible on the streets and large craters dotted the area which offered an irresistible and impromptu playground for the curious and adventurous.

In September 1967, Cunningham left primary school and started at Highgate Wood Secondary School in Hornsey. On his first day, uncharacteristically, he got into an argument with a boy called Robert Johnson. Johnson a big, physically strong boy, who had spent his first eight years in Jamaica, commanded respect by his appearance alone. A grandfather now and speaking in his comfortable, suburban, front room in Woodford Green in north-east London, he cuts a genial figure with a smiling voice that is never too far away from a spontaneous and infectious laugh. He recalls with a still discernible Jamaican lilt: 'Laurie never fight, but he fought me on our first day. It was all about defending somebody else that I tripped over and he thought that I was wrong. I shouldn't really have done it because I was bigger. But we were best friends after five minutes.'

Johnson became the first of a series of friends in Cunningham's life who looked out for him on the football pitch. Where Cunningham was quick, balanced and skilful, Johnson was strong, fearless and resolute. Both were natural sportsmen and seemed to spark off each other with an instinctive understanding of each other's ability.

'For the first year at school I didn't play football because my mum didn't like me playing it, so for the first year I played rugby and that's where me and Laurence got together. We were very quick, we were very tricky. Nobody could catch us. Then we started to play other sports as well, cricket, basketball, we were all-rounders basically. Laurie was a better all-rounder than I was, but still we had a great friendship and we played well together in everything. He'd look for me, I'd look for him. Playing football we didn't need to look to see

where each other was, we just hit the ball and knew we were going to be there. I could hit long balls to him and he could hit long balls back to me. I just knew where he was going next, it was like ball over the top, Laurie's on to it, goal.'

Apart from his talent as a sportsman Cunningham stood out in other ways too. Despite the fact he had to wear school uniform he managed to style it to his own taste. For example, the school jumper was navy blue, a colour he disliked and refused to wear throughout his life. Instead he chose to wear a black jumper which matched the black uniform trousers and highly polished shoes he favoured. If the desired effect was to get himself noticed it worked. Teenagers tend to pick up on the smallest stylistic transgression and the merest detail can have quite an impact. Johnson expands:

'Laurie always had this fashion thing even at school because he used to tie his tie differently. He was one of the first that came in with a short tie, that was his unique style, all of us used to try and blend in and tie it properly ... Laurie just had a way about him when he dressed, even with the school uniform he made it look good. Although he was in uniform he was just different. On the first day going back to school, you all want to make an impression, you'd dress up the morning you were going back into school, but when you got in the playground you'd look at one person and go "Oh God! Look at Laurie." His shoes weren't school shoes, they were patent or brogues. Anything in fashion, you name it, Laurence would have it before anyone, everybody, regardless. He always looked smart, but I had a feeling sometimes going to school that his mum did all that for him. He looked good but it wasn't him that did it, his mum sent him out like that.'

At the same time as Cunningham and Johnson started secondary school a remarkable football team was being assembled in Highgate by a forward-thinking social worker originally from Yorkshire called Bob Cottingham. Born in 1922, Cottingham had started coaching football in his mid-forties as a trainee social worker in Bermondsey, south London, where he formed a five-a-side football team for the youngsters in his care. After completing his training he began working for Islington council where he stayed for many years. The success of the Bermondsey side encouraged him to establish a similar five-a-side team closer to home in Highgate. Highgate North Hill, named after the address of the local primary school that his son attended, were formed in October 1967 and quickly transformed into an eleven-a-side team as word spread around the area.

The previous summer in 1966 England won the World Cup by beating West Germany 4–2 in a thrilling and unforgettable game at Wembley. A week after that famous victory Cottingham attended a residential Football Association coaching course at Loughborough College devised by the former England manager Walter Winterbottom. The need for a codified national coaching scheme had become paramount after the humiliating defeat suffered by England at the hands of Hungary in 1953. England were beaten, 6–3, for only the second time ever at Wembley. It was not so much the margin of the defeat as the manner of it that shocked supporters. England were inferior in every aspect. Led by the visionary Ferenc Puskás, the Hungarian side obliterated England with a dazzling display of flair and organisation that seemed to be light years ahead of the English game. In the return fixture

a year later in Budapest an almost identical England team, having apparently learnt nothing, received a 7–1 drubbing. As a serious and enlightened football man, Cottingham wanted to emulate the skill and simplicity that the Hungarians had shown. His son Steve Cottingham says of his father, 'The teams that influenced him the most were the Hungarians in the 1950s, they really broke the mould, Real Madrid and to some extent the Brazilians – this was before the 1970 World Cup – who were arguably the best side ever ... my father's philosophy was you put the team out and let them play, you wouldn't tie them down with tactics or tie them down with having to treat the ball like a hot potato, and that worked.'

Real Madrid sealed their reputation as the undisputed kings of European football after a superlative performance in the 1960 European Cup Final when they beat Eintracht Frankfurt 7–1 at Hampden Park in Glasgow – their fifth consecutive victory in the competition. Fluid and devastatingly effective they epitomised the new style of European football which made the English game look geriatric by comparison. England's World Cup victory was a vindication of coaching and tactics after the Hungarian humiliation – but seemed to do as much harm as good in the years that followed. Instead of embracing individuality and flair, organisation and a desire not to concede goals became the paramount concern. Adventure was frowned upon as players were urged to stick to the game plan devised by their coaches rather than relying on their instincts as footballers. Anybody who contravened this orthodoxy was deemed to be 'unprofessional' in an age when being called a 'good professional' was the ultimate praise. A dark ages

for creativity at international level followed as flair and guile perished in the face of conformity and grit.

Steve Cottingham is a friendly and engaging man who was born in 1957. Now a lawyer he remembers the first time he heard the name Laurie Cunningham. A friend came round to his house to tell him about a boy he had met at school who was interested in joining Highgate North Hill. He was an amazing winger, he said, and lived nearby in Finsbury Park. His friend was worried because he was a winger too but he brought him along to the next training session anyway. 'Laurie was just out of this world, he was dribbling around three or four of us as if it was the most natural thing in the world.' The new team was a true representation of the area and reflected Bob Cottingham's inclusive social worker beliefs. Steve adds 'we were drawn from the local community, a mixture of different backgrounds and race and class. We thought it was natural; I think it bothered other people more than it bothered us. Often a lot of sides we played were white, which coming from north London in those days was a bit odd because north London was a very mixed community, we had people from West Indian backgrounds and Greek Cypriot backgrounds all of whom reflected the community we lived in.'

Bob Cottingham said of his team 'we were just a street side, we didn't have any premises but we won the under-16 Middlesex Cup against bigger, better equipped teams' and said of the young Cunningham, 'he played the game pretty cheerfully, he never blew up ... he was a very happy and well-disposed youngster. In the team they knew who the star was, he had this remarkable skill, but he never put on side, he

never carried on as though he thought he was God's gift to football; he was a well-balanced boy I always thought. I felt he could go very far in the game, he had all the talent. He had such devastating effects on the opposition that you just let him loose and you got your results.'

From the outset the club was a family affair. The Cottinghams lived in a large house on Dukes Avenue in Muswell Hill with a spacious garden that was open to all visitors. After training each Saturday the boys would go back there for orange squash and hotdogs provided by Mrs Cottingham, who also washed and ironed the kit. Boys stayed until evening playing football in the garden and often shared dinner with the family. Robert Johnson, who joined the team at the same time as Cunningham, refers to the Cottingham house as a 'home from home', but didn't mention his visits there to his mother because she disapproved so strongly of his playing football. The informal and idyllic-sounding atmosphere found there would appeal to any boy and Cunningham became a regular visitor to the Muswell Hill house. Steve Cottingham fondly recalls: 'He'd just turn up sometimes and come in and we'd get on with whatever we were getting on with. If we were going down to my grandparents in Highgate he'd join us. He just fitted in. He didn't try and adapt himself for other people, he just was who he was, he had that confidence in himself; he could find himself in any number of situations and be able to deal with it. For example, my grandparents were fairly well-off middle-class Jewish people living in Highgate and they got on really well with him. Nothing seemed to faze him. He remained the same person whatever he was doing and whoever he

was with. At school I do not recall him getting into fights or trouble. Looking back he seemed to have an inner confidence which never came across as arrogance. People may have envied his astonishing ability, but no one I knew resented him. Far from it, we all wanted him to do well.'

By 1968 the Cunningham family had moved again to a three-storey house at 73 Lancaster Road near the busy Stroud Green Road in Finsbury Park. At the time the area was one of the poorest in London with an abundance of run-down, semi-derelict properties that were used as squats and houses could be bought for a couple of thousand pounds. Predominantly a West Indian and Irish neighbourhood with a tough reputation, the two communities generally got on well together – many Jamaicans shared the same Catholic faith as the Irish – but tended to keep themselves apart socially. The local pub, the Stapleton Arms – an ornate Victorian gin palace – had two main bars, one frequented by the Irish and the other by West Indians. The separation although conscious was not due to any particular ill-feeling between the two groups but more a case of how things were in a crowded working-class neighbourhood.

Highgate North Hill played in the Sunday morning Regent's Park League and Cottingham collected the boys in his Volkswagen camper van, handing out glucose tablets during the journey. He usually carried a spare pair of boots in Cunningham's size just in case, as he was prone to forget his own and usually picked him up outside the Lancaster Road house where he would be waiting, kicking a ball against a wall.

For Robert Johnson things were not so simple: 'Mr Cottingham did a lot for Laurie and a lot for me. My mum

was so strict she wouldn't let me come to the football but Mr Cottingham would bring the boys down to the front gate and beg for her to let me out, and she would say "there's no future in football, there's no money in it. I want him to have a skill." But then the boys would start: "please, please!" and eventually she would let me go.'

He further praises Cottingham for his understanding of the game and the way he could read the opposition, 'Sometimes we would lose 2–0, or 2–1, but by changing it round we could beat that team. Sometimes if we were playing a very strong team he'd say to me, "Robert I know you want to play up front, but you are playing centre back, you are playing the sweeper role." He reminds me of Alex Ferguson, creative, thinking about the game all the time.'

Football now dominated both boys' lives and even if there was something else arranged for the weekend, or a family commitment, both knew that they would play it at some point during the day. In summer, marathon forty-a-side matches open to all-comers took place in Finsbury Park when boys just turned up and joined in. Games that began in the early afternoon would not end until dusk. Johnson believes that this intuitive football-for-football's sake was crucial to the development of Cunningham's touch as a player. He says, 'It was just one big game really, that's how we kept fit, you just played football continuously, seven days a week, we just loved playing football. That's when you see Laurence at his best, we'd just control the ball, pass it, you didn't see people tearing around ... at school they banned big footballs because we used to break too many windows, so we used to play with tennis balls. We would play tennis over the net, Laurie was

great at that. Then the school started playing tennis football as training for the footballers, so that was great.'

Cunningham later remarked on these early days, 'I was always around black guys. We knocked the ball around in the streets. English kids seemed to rush around a shade too fast.'

In summer 1968 Cottingham organised an exotic football trip for his young team that would have a lasting effect on everybody who took part. The Highgate boys were a mixture in terms of race and social backgrounds, a few came from harsh environments, but most were drawn from ordinary families whose children went to the local comprehensive schools. Before the Channel Tunnel, continental Europe was another world and visiting it a considerable undertaking and beyond the budget of most working-class families. A day trip to France was the most many London schoolchildren experienced and to venture further afield was rare.

Cottingham organised a two-week tour to Vienna where Highgate were to play the youth teams of the city's top three sides – Rapid Vienna, Austria Vienna and Fortuna 05. Twenty boys were taken and the whole Cottingham family went along as well as it doubled up as the family summer holiday. Vienna may seem an unlikely choice but the connection was the result of a friendship made by Steve Cottingham at Highgate Primary School. He had befriended an Austrian boy called Andreas Rauscher who was a keen footballer and whose father was a diplomat. When he moved his family back to Austria in 1968 Rauscher senior, now a youth coach at Fortuna 05 in his spare time, invited Cottingham to bring his team over for a mini-tournament and combine it with a summer holiday. One of the players on the tour, Toby

Apperley, a minicab driver and photographer who now lives in South Wales – and who was by his own admission a 'live wire' as a twelve-year-old – has fond memories of the visit; and of Cottingham too, who helped his mother out when she was struggling to bring up four boys on her own. He let Apperley bring his brothers along to training at Regent's Park to give her a few precious hours break each week. Recalling the journey and arrival in Vienna, Apperley says: 'I remember after a gruelling journey by train and ferry and train again standing outside the Fortuna changing rooms at their mini stadium in the very hot sun. All the Highgate boys were lined up on one side with their luggage and the Austrian boys' parents were kind of taking their pick. Emotions were mixed, the majority of the boys had never been away from their parents for long, let alone been abroad. Now they were standing in a foreign country and being picked off by foster parents, albeit temporary ones. It was like a World War Two evacuee experience and must have been disturbing to some. There were a few incidents of nervousness and homesickness understandably, but most of us were looking at the mini stadium pitch. Although it was red gravel we didn't care, it was surrounded by high fencing with an entrance gate and cordoned off by advertising boards, for us very professional. A far cry from the multi-pitched Regent's Park with its central mass changing room.'

Split up amongst various families, the boys gathered at the house where Apperley was billeted next to the Fortuna ground for kick-abouts and visits to the adjacent park. Robert Johnson, a fussy eater, recounts cooking for the family he was with, who grew to love his speciality – Jamaican fried

fish. He still clearly recalls the quality of pitches the games were played on, in marked contrast to the municipal mud heaps they were all used to in England, 'The pitches were like carpet, we just kept touching it, when you hit a pass it just kept going straight. Oh man! It was beautiful.' In the first game Highgate beat Fortuna comfortably and in the second match faced Rapid Vienna's youth team at the impressive Prater Stadium. Press interest had grown around this multi-racial outfit from London and Cunningham was singled out as the star as he was scoring most of the goals. A picture of him training appeared on the front page of a daily newspaper and tickets were even sold for the game. Television news, intrigued, interviewed him and Apperley recalls his surprise when he was referred to as 'the negro Bobby Charlton', although he appreciates it was meant as a compliment, however clumsily phrased. The Rapid Vienna match was the first time Cunningham and his teammates had played before a paying audience and both Apperley and Steve Cottingham recall a few hundred curious spectators turning up to watch. Cunningham again played a starring role in the scorching, summer heat as the game finished in an honourable 2–2 draw. Between games the boys were treated to some excursions by their hosts including a coach trip to the Alps and the local Schneeberg mountain – 'the biggest mountain seen by any of us until then was probably Muswell Hill,' Apperley quips – and a visit to the famous Prater Fair which included a ride on the Wiener Riesenrad, the biggest Ferris wheel in Europe at the time at over 200 feet high.

The Highgate boys made an impact wherever they went standing out in the neat and tidy surroundings of late 1960s

Vienna. Apperley puts it succinctly: 'Everywhere we went, whether it was an organised trip or just on our own with the Fortuna boys, people would often stop and look, it was hardly surprising really looking back. Austria was quite conservative while Britain was culturally exploding in comparison. We could be messing about in the lovely Hugo Wolf Park just behind Fortuna's ground and there would be a skinhead boy with boots and braces, a scruffy long-haired boy and Laurie flashily dressed, but more startling to onlookers, black. I didn't notice any other black people the whole time we were there.'

The tour culminated in a mini-tournament between all four teams which was won by Highgate. An official reception was held at the palatial, plushly carpeted Town Hall to mark the occasion, complete with speeches and presentations made by the Lady Mayoress. Caviar on toast was served, which some of the boys to their cost mistook for blackcurrant jam. Sadly after two weeks and laden with chocolate and gifts, the boys bid an emotional farewell to their hosts and began the long journey home. Cunningham was given a gold necklace with a small football pendant as a keepsake which he proudly showed off to his teammates. As well as chocolate the boys also brought back some new skills from their Austrian friends – Johnson recalls seeing players chest the ball down from throw-ins and flick it with the outside of their foot in one move and most memorably of all he saw the 'rainbow flick' performed for the first time. This is a complex move whereby a player beats an opponent by rolling the ball up the back of their calf muscle with the instep of their opposing foot whilst running at pace and launching it

over their head and that of their opponent and leaving them for dead. Cunningham mastered it quickly as it played to his strengths: speed, balance and quick feet. Johnson states: 'We came back that summer and we tore up the league with it.' As a unit Highgate now had invaluable European experience and a strength and unity that few rivals could match.

By this time Cunningham was playing for London Schools, the district and Highgate North Hill, and professional scouts soon picked up on his eye-catching displays. Soon after the Austrian trip he was invited to train with Arsenal, his local team, two nights a week. Johnson was also part of the professional youth circuit in London and immediately both he and Cunningham came up against a different methodology to the loose, freewheeling style they had grown accustomed to under Cottingham. He says, 'We found at the professional clubs it was "give and go, give and go", but it was not always about "give and go". I would receive a ball, Laurence would receive a ball, we'd hold it and then we'd look, and beat two, three players, then give it and go, one, two go. And that's what Mr Cottingham's team was about. A lot of the players in Mr Cottingham's team were from Arsenal ... we'd play stronger teams and beat them: "Watch those two players." "That one." "Which one's Laurie Cunningham?" "I don't know." "Watch him, don't let him go down the wing." They'd kick Laurence to pieces but all Laurie had to do was "Rob, I'll find you a ball mate, just get on the end of it." And I used to get on the end of it. In Regent's Park we scored the most goals in one season, I think it was over a hundred, nobody came near to it.'

Bob Cottingham kept a record of results and press cuttings for his team and in what is probably the first mention of the

name Laurie Cunningham in print, he filed away one clipping from the *Hornsey Journal* dated 2 February 1968. Headlined 'Cunningham Makes Life Easy for North Hill', it read: 'Two goals and a non-stop display by Laurie Cunningham helped Highgate North Hill boys under-12 team to a 7–1 victory over Mildmay at Regent's Park ... Cunningham collected the ball on the halfway line, swerved past three defenders and hammered an unstoppable shot from twenty-five yards ... Cunningham's speed and control should have led to more goals if the forwards had taken the chances that he created.' In another match Highgate beat hapless Gainsford 26–0.

With players on the books of professional clubs across London, Highgate hit a purple patch and won the Regent's Park League, the Haringey Cup and the F.A. Youth Cup within a couple of years. In the final of the Middlesex Cup at Sutton United's ground – played excitingly for the first time under floodlights – Cunningham was the star once again. On a full-size heavy pitch, the hard fought final ended 1–1 after ninety energy-sapping minutes. In extra time Highgate emerged victorious as 2–1 winners but the exertions had taken their toll on everyone apart from Cunningham, his strength and athleticism astonished his teammates. After such a shattering encounter, Apperley recalls: 'In the changing room after, the celebrations were subdued. All the players, although really happy, were exhausted. Most were sitting down when Laurie bounced in, he had probably been running around the pitch. He rolled his socks into a ball, counted off ten keepy-uppies and shot them against the wall. Laurie had covered more ground than any other player and would have been man of the match. It's ludicrous to think that this boy, jumping with

delight after such a tough 120 minutes would, in a few years, be released by Arsenal football club citing lack of stamina.'

With five black players Highgate stood out from most of their opponents. Another black player in the team was Michael La Rose, now a lecturer on black history and culture and the son of John La Rose, the Trinidadian writer and activist who founded the New Beacon bookshop on Stroud Green Road in 1966 – a unique establishment that can claim to be London's longest running independent black bookshop.

La Rose speaks about the violence meted out to young black players at games during this time, especially in east London, an area where he says there were always problems. Fist fights on the pitch were common and black players were usually singled out for special treatment. Accordingly La Rose says you measured your teammates on how they defended you in such situations. In Cunningham's case if his speed and agility couldn't protect him then his friend Robert Johnson was more than willing to help out. It is impossible to think of teenage boys today being subjected to the kind of physical and verbal abuse that Cunningham, Johnson and La Rose were routinely exposed to – not just from their peers, but more disgracefully from snarling adults. Johnson tells of the ugly atmosphere on the touchlines at matches: 'We went through a lot of stuff. We played the semi-final of the F.A. Youth Cup in Yorkshire and we had dog shit thrown at us, bananas you know, and one guy was telling his son to break Laurie's leg and break my leg. I said, "You better shut your mouth, before your son comes off with a broken leg." Every time the dad said something I clapped that boy cos he was playing on the wing and I was right back. I hit him so hard in the end he just came

off. He asked his manager to take him off; he couldn't take no more and then his dad started to abuse him saying he's weak, and he was an up-and-coming England player! Me and Laurie at the end of the game were sat there laughing, cos it's an everyday thing for us you know. They thought the bananas and all of that was going to upset us, but actually we tore the hide off them ... Our parents didn't come to football but a lot of the white parents did and they used to intimidate us: "Oh, I got a baseball bat in the car for you, you don't know what I'll do after the game if you tackle my son." You know, I don't give a damn, one-time I did a Cantona and left the pitch. I knew I was going to tackle this boy but I wanted to miss him, I just wanted to hit his dad. Literally I just flew past this guy, straight into the dad, forearmed him, shut his mouth up. After that it was a wonderful game! Laurie wouldn't have done that. After he said, "Rob, that's the best thing I've ever seen you do."'

The racism was not limited to the sidelines of youth football. At professional clubs there were numerous black players on schoolboy contracts who never seemed to make any progress. Flair and individualism were generally frowned upon by English coaches and a common myth grew around black players that they lacked courage and stamina, were not prepared to graft, and were somehow unprofessional. This view conveniently overlooked the fact that the two best players in the world at the time, Pelé and Eusébio (both of whom had appeared, and been much admired in England, in the 1966 World Cup finals) were black. La Rose explains his feelings of frustration at witnessing teams with talented black players, such as Highgate, winning cups in London and nationally, but never breaking through to senior level.

'There was loads of black players signed to clubs but they couldn't get past schoolboy; most of the players that came out of Highgate North Hill didn't get past schoolboy, and even he [Cunningham] didn't get past it at Arsenal, he had to sign for Leyton Orient. Other people were signed at Tottenham, Chelsea, West Ham but couldn't get past the schoolboy apprenticeship situation and you knew if you were sixteen or seventeen and you hadn't been chosen that was it.'

With most clubs operating a closed shop, La Rose was prompted to form an all-black team called The Uniques as a direct response to the situation. He realised the only way to improve things was to take matters into his own hands and do it himself. He says, 'It was kind of moving up, well, we can't get in, then let's break the door down. A lot of black players played for the Cypriot and Turkish teams too, because they got paid; they had a lot of betting on the games and through that some black players went to Cyprus, Greece and Turkey and signed for professional teams. The other route was to go to the US and get into college football. They were the options in front of you.' Cunningham occasionally earned money playing in the Turkish and Greek leagues around north London as a 'boots for hire'. Skilful players offered their services around the municipal pitches at Market Road in Islington, where a fiver or the promise of a new pair of boots could buy you a guaranteed goalscorer for the day. With big sums of money changing hands in bets, demand was always high for a tried and tested match-winner like Cunningham.

Johnson – who played in Greece for six months after offers from Tottenham, Arsenal and Chelsea failed to materialise – highlights the divide that existed between the black and the

white players at professional clubs. It was not just a racial but a philosophical divide, too, one that questioned your whole approach to the game. He describes what it was like to be a black fifteen-year-old apprentice: 'We all did a youth circuit, Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham and so on. At Arsenal I didn't like how they treated us. You had the white and the black separate. At Tottenham we got five shillings or ten bob to go to the fish and chip shop and catch a bus home. The white guys were getting twenty-five pounds, they could take a cab home or whatever, have a meal, that sort of thing. It wasn't fair but you couldn't say nothing back, you just enjoyed your football, you just wanted to play football. Black wasn't seen as offensive because it wasn't used. They called us niggers back then, clearly called us niggers. You would hear it in Arsenal, "Those niggers are showing off again." When I went to Tottenham you could see the vibe between the black players and the white players. We were stronger, faster and more skilful but the first thing they would say was, "We don't want none of that flashy football. We want 'give and go'." If I can receive a ball and beat three or four men, what am I "giving it and going" for?'

Cunningham was released by Arsenal after two years aged sixteen in 1972 with the explanation he was 'not the right material'. Undoubtedly he did not do himself any favours with poor punctuality and his sometimes erratic behaviour; he would often turn up without boots or kit – Johnson often carried a spare pair of socks to lend him – but with both parents working long hours he found it difficult to organise himself and keep to a regular schedule. Arsenal, who had won the 'Double' in 1971, were managed

by Bertie Mee and coached by Don Howe, both old school disciplinarians in the English football tradition. Howe was part of the coaching staff for England's 1966 World Cup victory and a stickler for discipline. His Arsenal players personified the professional modern team, well-drilled, strong, effective and a bit dull. The Double winning team were not renowned for their flair but for their efficacy as a unit. Anyone who did not conform to the Arsenal code, on or off the pitch, stood out and risked falling out with management sooner or later.

Cunningham was devastated when Arsenal rejected him. Football had always come easily to him, he was the star in any side he represented and his outstanding athleticism and extraordinary skill marked him out at every level. Now like so many black teenage players it looked as if he had missed his chance and would become just another promising but ultimately unsuccessful footballer. He confided to friends that he did not enjoy the training sessions at Arsenal which were the polar opposite to his style of play; instead of running freely with the ball he was told to pass it as quickly as possible to a more senior player. Bob Cottingham later commented, 'There were some mistakes made at Arsenal. When they played him in trials they always played him out wide on the touchline, but that was not the way I played him because he withered out there. I played him behind the strikers, he did much more damage there, I felt he was isolated somewhat on the wing.' Conforming to a set pattern of play did not suit his temperament as an independent and increasingly confident teenager; he was most comfortable playing football in the instinctive way he always had. But if football did not want

him then maybe he did not want it. There was more to life – dancing, music, clothes and girls. London could offer it all to a young lad with spirit and imagination.

2

BLUES & SOUL

By the time Laurie Cunningham had turned sixteen in 1972, the racist jibes he suffered on the football field would have sounded familiar from his experience of growing up on the streets of Finsbury Park. Animosity felt by his peers towards the police and the authorities was universal. Stop and search was a law used specifically against black teenagers as a controlling tactic by the police. In Islington unemployment and homelessness, particularly among school-leavers, were on the increase. Struggling to find a meaningful identity and feeling estranged from their parents' culture, the term 'Black British' was yet to be conceived for this hard-pressed and disorientated younger generation. Overlooked by a society that was not that interested in what they had to say, these disregarded youths were left to fend for themselves. By describing this fractious, formative time, a clear context emerges of what life was like in London for Cunningham and his generation. He went on to become an important, pioneering figure for this group and his later success proved that you could be black, British and achieve at a national and international level regardless of your colour.

Keith Cunningham and Eustus Isiae became best friends at Archway Secondary School. Both were born, and spent their early years, in the Caribbean. Eustus who lived there for his first seven years, recalls the disconnection and anger he

felt towards his parents when he was growing up in Islington. If he was stopped by police or his parents received a phone call to say he had been taken to a station for questioning, 'They wouldn't believe you if you said the police had stopped you for no reason, instead they'd beat you and send you to bed. My parents were the ones coming out of slavery ... if they were going for a job they'd say "Good morning sir, I've come about the job" but they wouldn't look in the man's face in case he'd say no, you're too rude looking in the man's face,' he recalls. He also remembers the difficulty of being a black school leaver and looking for work. Walking past a shop one day he spotted a sign in the window: 'It said "young lad wanted apply within". So I went inside and said, "I'm applying about the job," and the owner said to a colleague, "Didn't you take that sign down? Sorry about that, it's already gone." So every day I walked past the shop and the sign was still there. Maybe if I was a white boy I'd still not have got the job, but as soon as the man saw me, he just didn't really want to know. That was the sort of thing we were up against.' The amount of young blacks walking the streets and sleeping rough after being thrown out of home or released from the care system at the age of sixteen, when legal responsibility ended for them, rose steadily in the borough. Nowhere existed to cater for their needs until a charismatic former bricklayer from Antigua set about addressing the problem and sought out premises to open a refuge for these vulnerable youths. Herman Edwards founded the Harambee Project, one of the first black hostels, in a derelict property in 1973 on Holloway Road. Harambee – a Swahili word meaning co-operation – came to be better known, locally and more simply, as the Black House. It was

set up in a disused butcher's shop and its adjacent buildings. Targeting drifting black youths, it attempted to break the cycle of petty crime, borstal or prison, and further crime that had trapped so many. Brother Herman, as everybody called him, was a rarity for the time – a sympathetic adult who was willing to act as advocate for the hostel's troubled occupants. He prioritised representation of black youths in police stations and magistrates courts, most of whom had ben detained without legal counsel after being arrested under the 'sus' law. The title 'Brother' was an important one as it suggested parity; a more paternalistic title, such as father or mister, would have provoked immediate distrust amongst the wary teenagers in his care.

In an attempt to get behind the alarmist headlines and moral panic about black teenagers, the *Sunday Times Magazine* tasked reporter Peter Gillman and photographer Colin Jones to 'go and find who is doing all the mugging'. Their feature on the Black House, which appeared in September 1973 and spread over eighteen pages, is an extraordinary, shocking and sensitive portrait of daily life at the hostel with Jones's outstanding photographs shining a light on a young and alienated community with little hope. He says of the time he spent there, 'It was very tough, some of them were very sad. It's one of the hardest assignments I have ever done.' After publication he exhibited his photographs to great acclaim at the prestigious Photographers' Gallery in central London. The reality of what he had captured only dawned on him at the opening night when he was asked: 'In which part of America did you take these photographs?' and he replied, 'Holloway Road, about three miles from here.'

When asked if mugging was a common practice, Jones's view is that it was far too risky and the rewards too unpredictable to be worth it – plus any crime against whites carried severe penalties. 'They were great cat burglars, they mainly stole amongst themselves and the reason they did that was that they knew that they wouldn't be split on,' he observes. By quoting the hostel's inhabitants in depth, Gillman's words give voice to a totally marginalised stratum of society. One inhabitant named Paul recounts his experience of growing up in London. At a job interview he was told, 'You don't mind if we call you a black bastard or a wog or a nigger or anything because it's entirely a joke. I told him to keep the job ... When I was small I used to go around saying that I'm English and I'm proud of being English. But then suddenly it hit me that the English didn't want me to be an Englishman. I don't call myself nothing to do with the English race in fact. They look upon me as a stranger so I look upon myself as a stranger in this country.' Another boy, eighteen-year-old Beckford, mentions Enoch Powell's offer of repatriation and says that if he was given his fare and £2,000 he would go back to the Caribbean, and speaks about police use of stop and search: 'Sometimes you get mad and you get nicked for assault – you just push them away and it's assault. They come and put their hand in your pocket. You can't let them do that. Even though they say they have the right to do that. You say you'll turn your pocket out but they say no, they still want to search you. You say no and the fight starts like this and the next day you're in court. Then you get six months or something.'

And Jones recalls one sad and mysterious character who hid himself away in the crowded and often violent house,

'He wouldn't let me near him with a camera even if I paid him. I used to spend a lot of time in his room talking to him because he was interesting, and one day he said to me, "My legs have swollen up," and Herman wasn't there. I had a friend who was a doctor and I asked him to come and have a look at him and he told him, "What you've got is beriberi from lack of vitamins." He'd cook rice and a tin of sardines and he'd overcook it, he cooked any goodness out of it, and that's all he lived on, and that's how he got beriberi. It's a tropical disease really, not many people in London get beriberi. Then one day he'd gone, nobody knew where or why he was there.' More disturbingly he recalls an incident with a boy known as Johnny Rasta who took his frustration with his father to extremes; one day 'He had a big argument with his dad and broke a bottle and put it in his face and blinded his father, and for six months he wouldn't get out of bed, he was in a state of depression over what he'd done.'

Keith Cunningham worked at the Black House and was part of a wide group of friends who passed through its doors. Eustus, whose home life was difficult, often spent the night there if he had argued with his parents. It provided a sense of community and freedom for many young men and women who had nowhere else to go. Edwards brought in teachers to help some of the youths with reading and writing, and invited speakers to come and talk about Afro-Caribbean history. Muhammad Ali even visited once and donated a pair of boxing boots and a signed poster as a gift to the project. 'It was somewhere to go, you could have a game of pool in there, they would teach you about black history, try to get you to see if you could understand. Most of our parents didn't want

us to go there because as far as they were concerned we were being told bad things. Our parents were the type that would turn the other cheek if you slapped them. God said it was best to let them slap the other one too,' Eustus recalls.

The most famous celebration of Caribbean identity in London is the Notting Hill Carnival; more than just a street parade, it carries important spiritual and mythological dimensions too. The idea of a whole area being given over to a black festival unsettled the Metropolitan police who suspected many black youths of being inherently criminal. On Bank Holiday Monday 31 August 1976 the carnival descended into a riot with running battles between the police and groups of black youths. 325 police were injured and 68 people were arrested. Described inaccurately as a race riot by some newspapers it was the first riot in a generation directed solely against the police. Organisers complained of the heavy police presence and one carnival goer complained 'all the people in the carnival procession coming down Portobello Road could see was the police cordon – a forest of helmets. It made them angry because it is our carnival, not theirs.' The riot was a fight back by black youths against constant daily harrassment from the police. Stung by criticism of their colleagues in the press, police in Islington patrolled in vans, stopping black teenagers demanding to know if they had been at the carnival.

Eight weeks after the riot, on 26 October, eighteen black teenagers from Islington, between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, were arrested by CID detectives at their homes and workplaces without warrants and held for three days at various police stations in north London. Anxious to

get statements before the boys could get any legal advice the police used disorientation tactics and moved them between stations without informing their parents of their whereabouts, until 'confessions' were taken and they were brought before Highbury Magistrates Court and remanded for trial. Two of the accused were staying at the Black House when they were arrested. One of them, Michael Otway, can be seen as sadly typical of the vulnerable young people who ended up there. Born in Grenada he came to England at the age of seven and was expelled from school for fighting aged thirteen after which he was disowned by his parents. Homeless since he was fourteen years old he was advised to go to the Black House by his social worker where he was picked up for burglary by Holloway police and sent to borstal and afterwards returned to the Black House where he was again picked up by police in connection with the Notting Hill charge. The eighteen defendants were remanded for four and a half months from their committal in December to their trial in April 1977, so the police effectively locked them away and removed them from the streets well before they had to answer any charges.

The trial at the Old Bailey lasted for three months (with an extra delay caused by the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations). The jury retired for 170 hours and from the questions they asked the judge were clearly uncomfortable with the multiple charges brought before them. Three of the defendants, including two brothers, pleaded guilty in return for a borstal sentence. All the others accused with the charge of 'conspiracy to rob and steal' were found not guilty, neither were any found guilty of charges relating specifically to the

Carnival. The jury had simply found the case too difficult too understand. Crucially the prosecution based its evidence on 'confessions' and none of the fifty-two witnesses called could point to a defendant and say 'that's the man', neither could police photographs produced in court place any of the defendants at the Carnival on the Bank Holiday Monday. The embarrassment and expense of the whole affair completely discredited the 'sus' law which was finally repealed four years later in 1981.

Laurie Cunningham offered his own take on his background when he told a newspaper in 1977, 'I was born a Londoner and an Englishman,' but, 'you think back to where your family really belong. My parents and older brother were all born in Jamaica and I've been brought up to think of it as somewhere special. I've never been to Kingston but I feel that I know it all from the pictures I've been shown of the place and the stories I've heard.' He goes on to query the surnames of his extended family such as Cunningham, Laing and McGibbon – the names of Scottish slave masters – and comments with quiet irony, 'You do think back to where your family really belong, and wonder which part of Africa, or which tribe your great, great, great, great grandfather might have come from. I suppose we could go back to African names but because we've been civilised we've got good old Scottish names and we are Cunninghams.'

Edwards attempted to cultivate a confidence in his charges, or as he put it a 'sure footing'. Let down by the education system, he felt they needed to learn their own history before they could advance. Brought up on a borrowed English culture and rejecting their parents acquiescent

values, they had no real sense of who they were so expressed their frustration by rebelling against society through crime and violence. He concluded, 'They are empty people, people without any ingredients of their own society. They have to understand they are black. I think this is the greatest complex young people have in this country. Harambee is a project to let you know you are black. It's a project to let you know that white society doesn't understand you and it's best when you understand yourself, because then you can participate in white society.' One rare sympathetic policeman, Inspector Williams, from Upper Street station, who had previously spent time in Jamaica and visited the Black House regularly, remarked of the place, 'Harambee is the only hope for some of these young kids. They have rejected the society in which we live and it's the only place where you can attempt to get them back into society again. Some of the officers regard it as a den of thieves. But the people in there do not exist because of Harambee. Harambee exists because of them, and there's nowhere else for many of them to go.'

In the tense, sometimes aggressive environment, a certain tolerant chaos existed and Edwards was criticised for the lack of structure in the house by visiting social workers and local authority inspectors. Islington Council never fully trusted his financial management or the fact that he had no formal qualifications. In 1977 he was prosecuted when auditors checked his books and found evidence of unauthorised expenditure for visiting courts and prison. Although the presiding judge accepted he had spent none of the money on himself he was sentenced to six months in Pentonville prison and when funding was withdrawn the Black House closed

its doors and the derelict buildings were demolished soon after. Colin Jones remembers Edwards in the following way, 'He worked hard under the most extreme conditions, finding time at any hour for the people in his care. One of the many things Herman did was to try and get bail for those who had been arrested and charged, keeping them out of prison for as long as possible, especially if it was a first offence. For an ex-bricklayer he made a pretty good social worker.'

Having spent the early years of his life in Jamaica Keith Cunningham identified strongly with the so-called 'rebel generation' that allied itself with reggae music in the 1970s – a generation with an awareness of the teachings of Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King that asserted independence of thought and cultural expression as crucial to the development and survival of the black race – and whose social gatherings at sound system and blues parties were an essential part of this identity. By contrast his brother was a London-born soul boy or 'West End man', who danced to a different beat. 'I was a bopper and he was a swinger,' he explains. Through his involvement in football Cunningham became immersed in British culture to a much greater degree than his older brother did. Where Laurie loved soul music Keith was a reggae man all the way. Reggae was defiantly working-class and had a powerful Rastafarian ideology of simplicity and spirituality. Soul on the other hand was largely apolitical and concerned itself with sophistication and personal aspiration, two more overtly Western traits.

Attending twice-weekly training sessions at Arsenal, Cunningham picked up more than just football skills and began to dress like the older players he admired. The

footballer style was set by the likes of Chelsea in London at this time and was a smart and casual look. Button-down Ben Sherman shirts were worn with pressed trousers, cardigans and loafers: versatile outfits that were smart enough to be worn straight from training to a party or club. Cunningham's school friend Robert Johnson remembers being influenced by this look and recalls shopping at a men's outfitters on Farringdon Road that specialised in Ben Sherman shirts. He had parallel trousers made to measure by a friend's father who was a tailor on Green Lanes in Haringey – 'straight down, sharp' – and says, 'you would do anything to play for the club, so you had to look the part too.' As they grew to young adults the Cunningham brothers followed separate lifestyles and kept different hours. Keith followed a Jamaican routine, where the night's entertainment began around midnight and between clubs and house parties would continue until the following morning many hours later, at which time his brother would be getting ready to go to football training.

Despite the harshness and discrimination of everyday life – or perhaps because of it – black music and fashion in London underwent a productive, creative phase during this time. One tangible expression of identity was through music. A group of boys from the Black House, including Eustus and Keith, established a sound system called 'Sir Power, the Killer Sound', that played every Friday night at Archway Methodist Hall. Keith came up with the name after buying a 1,000-watt amp from Muzic City in Finsbury Park – stockist of some of the best electrical equipment around. With the rallying call of 'Sir Power on the Hour', at its height it attracted six to seven hundred revellers to its dances. Running a

'sound' was a serious enterprise, you needed an electrical engineer, a sound engineer who knew about speakers and amplification, someone who knew how to produce the distinctive bass line – and reliable transportation. Sir Power built a good reputation playing house parties and town halls in Hornsey and Finsbury Park, against the dominant north London sound systems of the day such as Fatman Sound in Tottenham. Eustus explains, 'If people were keeping a dance they'd put us on the bill because we were up-and-coming, our crowd would come and pay their fifty pences, we used to play West Green Road in Tottenham, clash with Fatman sound. Chicken sound in Stoke Newington at St Mark's Rise – he was famous because his dance used to go on until two in the afternoon.' Records were sent directly to Eustus from Jamaica by Prince Buster's record shop at 127 Orange Street in Kingston, weeks before they received a UK release date. Giant speaker cabinets were made by a friend's father who was a carpenter and the local greengrocer Mr Young lent them his van to help ferry equipment around. On one occasion a police van was made available by Inspector Williams to get Sir Power to a dance on time. With a crowd waiting outside the hall in Archway, and to ease congestion, a 'Black Maria' was sent to pick them up and transport equipment to the venue. 'It made a change, usually they were confiscating it!' Keith remarks.

Any sound system worth its salt had to be innovative and stay a step ahead of its competitors by playing exclusive tracks that could not be heard anywhere else. These specials or 'dubplates' were cut by a producer in the studio as one-off versions of a song, often with effects added on especially for

sound systems. Eustus recalls a piece of good fortune when they got one over on a rival, more established, sound: 'we cut specials in a studio off Old Street run by Clancy Collins, who made dubplates for a sound called Count Shelley, but Shelley never paid him, kept fobbing him off, gave him a few quid here, a few quid there. One day when we were due to play against Shelley, Clancy said to us come down to the studio as he is going to cut some dubs of the dubs. So what Shelley played on the night, we had a different version of it, a dub of the dub. When Shelley played his and said "dubwise from Count Shelley", I'd be on the other side saying "that's not dubwise – anybody can play that" and play the same tune back to him, "but listen to a dubwise from Sir Power", and we'd play a version. He didn't know that Collins had given us all this stuff to mess him up, cos he wouldn't pay him.'

While Keith was preoccupied with reggae his younger brother started to discover the soul scene where he met Bert Jordine when they were teenagers and they quickly became close friends. The two hit it off immediately and it's easy to see why. Jordine is an easy-going affable person. Both shared a similar sense of humour and a mutual interest in fitness and dance. Jordine, born in 1955, was not a footballer but loved martial arts and together they would train in his front room in Tottenham, with his cousin a third Dan karate master. Karate helped with Cunningham's all-round fitness and suppleness on the football field, but also benefited the mental side of his game as he began to develop a calm, meditative routine before matches. Of similar build and height, Jordine would accompany Cunningham to a tailor's shop in Stratford where the pair ordered matching outfits: getting identically

to invest in the club and join the board as directors. Grade and his brother Lew were the leading talent and theatrical agents in London who also ran the ATV television company. Delfont controlled a stable of West End theatres and could be seen every year on the red carpet welcoming Her Majesty the Queen to the London Palladium for the Royal Variety Performance.

Zussman employed his own unique brand of showmanship in the dressing room after games by rewarding players with notes pulled from a large wad or offering complimentary tickets to his partner's West End shows. When the club relocated in the 1930s the original Jewish East End around Whitechapel was starting to spread to the less crowded and airier northern and eastern suburbs of London. A generation had begun to make its way in the world and moved on to places like Finchley and Hendon in the north and Leyton and Stratford in the east. Leyton Orient, a small, close-knit club offered a welcome that its bigger, more famous neighbour West Ham United did not – whose core support was drawn primarily from white working-class dock workers. Zussman loved to trade on the club's underdog status in the area and generated a good-humoured 'them and us' mentality which held a strong appeal to the Jewish psyche. This liberal, everyone-welcome atmosphere proved attractive to a dedicated band of Jewish supporters despite the limitations often evident on the pitch.

start here

After the shock of rejection from Arsenal, Cunningham might easily have turned his back on football but Bob Cottingham was convinced he could get him into a London club and set about using his contacts to find him one. He was friendly with a former professional player whose son had

graduated from Highgate North Hill to Arsenal alongside Cunningham. That boy, Glenn Roeder, went on to play professionally for Queens Park Rangers and managed both West Ham United and Newcastle United. Roeder senior would often drive the two boys to training at Arsenal's Highbury Stadium and take them to away fixtures. Glenn Roeder, a talented ball-playing defender, was released by Arsenal at the same time as Cunningham and his father immediately contacted an old teammate from his playing days to see if he could offer his boy a second chance at a new club.

George Petchey became the manager of Second Division Leyton Orient in 1971. A tough ex-professional from Whitechapel who had played wing half (defensive midfield) for West Ham and Brighton in the days 'when centre half's had cut heads and broken collar bones', he was keen to change the traditional, physical playing style at the club to a more thoughtful, dynamic one. His assistant was Arthur Rowe, the former Tottenham Hotspur manager who had devised the 'push and run' style of football at White Hart Lane after the war. Push and run was a high-tempo attacking style of football that encouraged players to move position often and take on greater responsibility for the ball. Used with fluidity and pace it had earned Tottenham their first ever league title in 1951. For it to work effectively, push and run needed intelligent players with a good touch and the awareness and vision to play the right pass at the right time – attributes that Cunningham and Roeder both possessed. Petchey agreed to see Roeder for a trial and when told by his father that Arsenal 'don't half let some good players go', was

curious enough to ask who else he had in mind. He suggested Cunningham, adding 'he's a bit of a rascal, a bit of an awkward boy,' to which Petchey responded 'get him here, let's talk to him.' Petchey, now in his eighties, looks a diminutive, domestic figure in his carpet slippers, sipping tea in his small comfortable living room just outside Brighton, with his wife Moll providing generous plates of sandwiches – but it is not difficult to picture him years ago at Leyton Orient shouting, cajoling and berating his players to do things his way. He has a natural authority and calmly expressed knowledge, to which young players must have responded.

Laurie Cunningham did, after a difficult start. Orient teammate Bobby Fisher, a sixteen-year-old apprentice at the time, remembers the morning of Cunningham's trial: 'The arrangement was to be at the ground for 9.30 so we could go to training. So we got changed, no Laurie. We warmed up for another fifteen minutes, no Laurie, and by 10.30 still no Laurie. George started picking the sides and I look across at this shadowy figure just casually walking across the pitches to us. You could see it was a black guy, as there weren't many black guys around. I thought it must be him. The first thing I thought to myself was this guy has been let go by Arsenal and Orient have given him a chance and it's probably his last chance of getting into the professional game. If I was him I'd be sprinting across the pitch and grovelling on my hands and knees, but this guy just sauntered across the pitch and just stood there and didn't say a word.'

When asked why he was so late, he replied, 'I overslept.' What sounded like arrogance – punctuality was a perennial problem – would become more understandable as Petchey

patiently spent time getting to know the boy and gradually drew him out of himself. After such an inauspicious start Cunningham had a lot to prove and started to do so right away. Petchey recalls: 'I stuck him into a training match without introducing him to anyone and he was brilliant. When I say brilliant I mean he did a lot of things that you wouldn't expect a kid to do. He went past the full back and he looked up and we had a centre forward who was big, and he just plonked it on his head. I was sitting with Arthur Rowe on the touchline, and I looked at Arthur and he looked at me and said "I've had great players but I've never seen anybody do that." He must have done it five times, went down the line, crossed it and it went exactly where he wanted it to go, didn't miss a pass all day. We had four or five wingers who went down the line and crossed it and it hit the full back in the face or on the body, so we'd never get a decent cross from them. But Laurie, different class. He would swerve it round the full back and he'd put it where he wanted to put it every time. That was his talent. There was nothing he couldn't do. He could do anything once you gave him the ball, he loved playing with the ball. I said I'd sign him.'

Cunningham's athleticism and running off the ball were a gift for a manager trying to mould his team into an elegant push-and-run side. Frustratingly for Petchey too many of his players were content to whack the ball the length of the pitch while doggedly holding their position. Excited by the teenage prospect but conscious that he needed careful handling, Petchey deputised Fisher to keep a watchful eye on the new arrival. Fisher was Orient through and through. Mixed-race with an Afro hairstyle and striking light grey

eyes, he had been adopted as a baby by a local Jewish family named Lazarus with strong connections to the club. Mark Lazarus was a notable former Orient player and his sister Rosie had brought up the infant Fisher. Cunningham noted the relaxed, liberal feel of the club which allowed Petchey to be innovative and to offer local young black players a chance. After he joined, Orient could count five black players on their books. Fisher comments on the mentoring role he was given by Petchey: 'He wanted me to push these guys, to filter them in. I was the senior black player aged sixteen! I was there to slow Laurie down a bit, make sure he was there on time and say to him, "I know you want to do your own thing but sometimes you have to play the game a little bit because you may be under pressure if you don't."'

Later, when Cunningham and Fisher broke into the first team, Petchey was heavily criticised by the local press and wider community for fielding so many non-whites. By this time he had also signed the Indian-born player Ricky Heppolette, a strong midfielder, for the specific purpose of protecting Cunningham on the pitch, and the skilful and aggressive young striker John Chiedoze, a refugee from the Biafra–Nigeria civil war. Supporters of the National Front wrote regularly telling him he should stop playing 'these niggers' and he remembers falling out with a local sports reporter who could not understand why he was signing so many blacks to the club. The fact that Bobby Fisher was mixed-race and brought up by a Jewish family didn't seem to make much difference either. He put it bluntly: 'In those days if you had a suntan you were counted as black.' Petchey responded to his critics by inviting them to watch a local

school match where he assured them they would soon discover that the best players were all black. To the local reporter's charge that his black players lacked courage and were cowardly, a depressingly common view held throughout football, he responded: 'You tell me Muhammad Ali is a coward. I say no, I don't believe that. I tell you what, three of them will be great players. Laurie Cunningham will be the best, then John Chiedoze behind him and Bobby Fisher.'

Cunningham was signed as an apprentice by Leyton Orient in August 1972 aged sixteen and made his first team debut two years later in August 1974. Orient were assembling a good footballing side under Petchey and by the final months of the 1973–74 season were vying for promotion to the First Division for only the second time in their history. With the top three teams automatically promoted, Orient lay fourth and needed to win their last game – played at home in May 1974 versus Aston Villa – to secure two points and a guaranteed promotion spot. But for all their reputation as a friendly club with an apparent bonhomie that extended from the boardroom to the playing staff, Orient seemed content to stay within the limited horizons of a small London club. Petchey bitterly recalls the myopia and lack of ambition he experienced from the board and reveals an insight into how, back then, clubs like Orient were run as personal fiefdoms by the chairmen and members of the board. Knowing his side were capable of winning promotion, Petchey approached his chairman Harry Zussman about the possibility of buying Aston Villa player Ray Graydon to consolidate his team.

'I had often gone into a board meeting and been told to leave because I had asked for money to buy a player. They'd

say, "No, we will talk about the money, we don't need you in the boardroom." So they used to kick me out and I would go home. So the next day nothing would be said and I would ask "Did I get any money to spend?" ... There was one particular time when we needed a couple of points to go up to the First Division and we were playing Aston Villa, and the outside right of Aston Villa [Ray Graydon] I had wanted to buy about six weeks before we played them, and Zussman said, "No, we can't give you the money". It was something like £7,000 – bloody nothing. I said, "Do you want to go up or not?" He said, "George, you've done well, you're a good manager, but we don't want to go in the First Division." I said, "You don't want to go in the First Division? What do you think I'm killing myself, and the players are killing themselves for?" He said, "We will only come down again." I gave up in my own mind that day. So I didn't get the money and we drew 1–1 with Aston Villa and that bastard [Graydon] scored a penalty.'

Petchey had debated whether or not to play Cunningham in that crucial match but decided against it, relying on experience and perhaps showing loyalty to the side that had done so well to get within touching distance of the top flight. He also knew that the club were not going to match his ambition and that he would be forced to rely on the squad of players he had already assembled. It was unsurprising, then, when Cunningham made his first team debut at the start of the following season. Petchey had calculated that if he could get hold of a player who was in the top forty in London he would be able to build the team around such an individual. In the young Laurie Cunningham he was sure he had found that man. The two years Petchey spent nurturing Cunningham

had not been easy. As he had shown on the day of his trial, punctuality and responding to discipline meant little to the young player. On the one occasion that Petchey spoke to his father Elias on the telephone he had been told, 'He needs some looking after because he has had a free run, because I've been working. Don't be frightened to do whatever you want with him, because that's what he needs.' He soon came up against a defensive, self-contained young man used to living on his wits. Unlike many of his peers Cunningham did not come from a strong footballing background. His father considered the game to be little more than a pastime, like cricket, to be played at your leisure. Petchey realised early on that he had constantly to speak to Cunningham to slowly earn his trust, and once he understood what his manager could do for him Cunningham began to open up, and a bond developed between the two men.

Fisher believes the understanding shown by Petchey came at exactly the right time and suggests that without it Cunningham could easily have drifted away from the game. With an exceptional talent he nonetheless still had much to learn, and a nurturing, holistic approach was the surest way to get the best out of the gifted but raw teenager. Petchey remembers with wry exasperation now, but deep frustration at the time, the lengths he was forced to go to with his young player: 'His idea of playing football was playing on a Saturday then having a great time all week, then coming in and playing again Saturday. He thought he could do it like that. Gradually he learnt. He was such a bugger not turning up on time. I remember I fined him twice a week for six weeks for lateness. I said right, I'm going to fine you £10 every time you are late.

First week he was late twice, so that was £20, of course he only got paid £40 ... the structure of his brain was such that he said, "It's not my fault," and I said, "Well, whose is it?" and he said, "Well, I go to sleep and I don't wake up" ... I spent a lot of time with him, I tell you. We used to ring up and there would be no answer, his parents would be at work, he'd oversleep. Every time he didn't turn up I'd send someone round his house, and nine times out of ten he'd knock on the door and there'd be no answer, so in the end we shouted "Police!" through the letterbox and that got him up.'

Petchey identified in the youngster an innocence and lack of understanding about life which Arsenal had responded to by rejecting him, a decision which still baffles him. He was convinced a bright future lay ahead for his new signing and predicted great things.

'He was influenced by everything. I said to him one time, "All that glitters is not gold, sometimes it's a reflection." If anyone calls you a name forget it, go out and play, just laugh and walk away. If you do that, after a time it will be "Hello, Laurie". That's how it will turn out, everybody will want to know you. You keep playing like you are, you'll be picked for England under-21s, you'll catch fire. Everybody will want to know you, it's going to be a great life.'

Football promised a great life with great hours too. Training began at 10 a.m. and would be over by 12.30, leaving the rest of the day free. As soon as Cunningham and Fisher became friends they began to explore London together. Neither of them fitted the mould of the stereotypical footballer who relaxed with a few pints after training in the nearest pub or played a round of golf at the local course. Fisher says that

they simply did not want to be around boozing footballers all the time. 'We used to hate those big dimpled pint mugs, we wanted a glass of wine, there was a lovely feel about it. No footballer would ever drink wine, it was pints of lager and lime.' The pair would talk about music, cinema and fashion, get the tube into the West End to see a film or just look around, soaking up the atmosphere. Elegant wine bars were to be found on Oxford Street and Baker Street, and, most glamorous of all, Morton's Piano Bar on Berkeley Square in Mayfair, where Cunningham would blow his weekly wages on bottles of champagne with the new friends he made there. The sheer excitement of setting foot in this rarefied, exclusive world where nobody knew you were a footballer unless you told them so, thrilled the would-be sophisticates. They would got to the King's Road, Chelsea where Cunningham would jot down notes and sketch ideas for outfits into his drawing pad.

Quite how distinctive the pair had become was brought home to Fisher when they played for Orient reserves away against Southend United. Arriving on the team bus, Cunningham and Fisher were sitting with their good friend and teammate Tony Grealish, a loud and voluble second-generation Irish immigrant who had been brought up in a pub in Paddington. As the bus pulled in to the Southend ground they noticed their opponents soberly dressed in club suits, ties and dark shoes, the uniform of the young footballer. Bobby Fisher recalls the moment the Orient players disembarked: 'There was Tony Grealish, big beard, loon pants, platform shoes and a jacket. I came off with a sparkly jacket, silk trousers and high platform boots and a big Afro. You could see the Southend boys going, "What's

this? The circus has arrived." And then Laurie came off with a gangster suit, shirt and tie, tiepin, two-tone shoes, fedora and a cane, and it was like "Oh, man! What's happening here?" ... You look back at it now and it was quite exceptional, you looked at it then and it was just part of him.'

Cunningham was absorbing influences in the way he dressed from numerous sources. The radical designs he saw in a select few shops in places like the King's Road encouraged him to experiment and mix and match second-hand clothing with new, small-run designer items. He was beginning to personalise his look by scouring markets in Camden Passage in Islington, where good-quality, well-made forties and fifties clothing – jackets, shoes and ties – were sold in bundles on the pavement. Styling original 1940s clothing into his wardrobe created an entirely individual, curated look, assembled with fastidious attention to detail; clothes that ordinarily may not have gone together did when worn by him as a complete outfit. He made them look good. His enviable dress sense instantly singled him out as different and attracted plenty of attention. Fisher remembers, 'He had to be different, whatever. Laurie's biggest fear was becoming like everyone else, becoming the norm, he really didn't want to.' Not many people looked like Cunningham at the time and it took some front to dress in such a way, particularly in the world of professional football where the sarcastic comments from teammates must have come thick and fast. At first glance someone dressed so lavishly might be assumed to be an extrovert demanding centre stage, but this was not the case. An introverted – at times awkward – teenager who was cautious with strangers, the clothes

he loved to wear sent out a message so powerful that they succeeded in deflecting attention away from the person wearing them. His individuality could be communicated non-verbally, thus avoiding difficult questions, and if people wanted to believe he was up front and flash then so be it; they didn't know the real person after all. This self-invention, or creation of a persona, spoke of a desire to not conform – a feeling common to many teenagers and by no means unique to Cunningham – which he chose to express in a strikingly imaginative way. By dressing in such a distinctive manner he was saying that football was not the only thing that mattered, it did not define him, and clothes could be used as a tool to explore different aspects of his personality.

As Petchey noted he was 'influenced by everything', which may sound like criticism of his naivety, but can also be read as a receptiveness to new ideas and a willingness to engage in the world beyond football. If outside interests clashed with training Petchey was often left in the lurch and, as we have seen, compelled to fine his player for it. Fisher refers to the moods that sometimes overtook Cunningham where he seemed to be present more in body than in spirit: 'If he focused in on something that was it, games and everything else would go out of the window. They wouldn't be important, something else would come up that focused his attention.' This focus was integral to the nature of his talent and what may have been considered eccentric or odd behaviour is indicative of how his mind worked. Petchey instinctively understood this, recognising in Cunningham a maverick streak that was as brilliant as it was exasperating. At times he wondered if he could ever win his complex young

player over: 'The old eyes flashed when I fined him, but for all that I loved the spark that made him,' he says.

Cunningham made his professional debut on 3 August 1974 against West Ham in the Texaco Cup, a short-lived tournament involving teams from the UK and Ireland, and made his full League debut two months later against Oldham Athletic at Brisbane Road. Then, in December, he was picked for an away match against Millwall – a club notorious for the vehemence and violence of its supporters – along with the club's two other black players, Bobby Fisher and Ricky Heppolette. Millwall's fearsome reputation was enough to deter even the Orient fans from travelling in any great numbers and when the trio took to the field they were almost certainly the only blacks inside the ground. The players' tunnel was situated, intimidatingly, directly behind one of the goals and flanked by hostile home fans penned in behind a wire cage. As Orient emerged they were greeted with jeers; the black players were spat at and met with a chorus of racist chants and obscenities. Bananas were hurled onto the pitch and a carving knife was reportedly later found by the side of the pitch. Petchey had earlier warned his players not to play too near the touchline if they could help it, in case fans threw ball bearings at them. Fisher remembers the pressure he felt every time he got the ball and the tangible sense of hatred he and his fellow black players provoked by their mere presence in this tight and highly charged atmosphere. The match finished 1–1, with Cunningham scoring a late equaliser, and at the final whistle the players began their thankless walk back to the tunnel in front of the snarling Millwall faithful. As Cunningham and Fisher approached the touchline the fans' hatred reached a new level.

Fisher takes up the story. 'So we were on the pitch and perhaps felt a little bit safe. We put our arms around each other and blew them a kiss and then gave them the Black Power salute ... the tension changed from hatred to "now we want to kill you and we will lynch you". They jumped up onto the fence and four or five coppers dragged us down the tunnel and threw us into the changing room. A copper came in and said whatever happens do not leave this room and closed the door behind us. An inspector came in about two minutes later and said, "Do you know you have incited a riot. We could charge you." We thought: have you been here for the last ninety minutes?'

After being held back in the dressing room for an hour the Orient team were finally allowed to board the team coach under police protection, with the warning that if any stones were thrown to lie flat on the floor, as motorcycle outriders quickly escorted them back across London. The irony of the police inspector attempting to blame Cunningham and Fisher for provoking a riot was indicative of the way racism in football was perceived at the time. Fisher insists the Black Power salute was a spontaneous response to the barracking he, Cunningham and Heppolette had received throughout the game. He says it was not pre-planned and that neither of them fully understood the political significance of the gesture; it was just something they had seen American black athletes do in the 1968 Olympics. It looked good and in the heat of the moment they wanted to emulate them. But they were both aware of the significance of making such a salute at The Den, the home of Millwall Football Club. The club that celebrates its self-styled nastiness with the chant

'no one likes us, we don't care', was a bastion of racism in 1974. To make such a gesture, in the 'Lion's Den', meant more than it would at any other ground in the country. As Fisher comments, the implication to the Millwall fans that night was clear: 'This is your greatest fear, this is really going to kill you, and you can't do a thing about it.' There were no headlines in the press the following day; the issue of racist abuse inside football grounds was seen as something that was not a problem for clubs, rather it was a symptom of the wider ills of society. Nobody was ever thrown out of a ground for racial abuse or for threatening conduct. If the subject was ever mentioned at all in boardrooms it was probably met with palms up, outstretched hands and a shrug of the shoulders.

As Cunningham was selected for the first team more regularly, Petchey asked key players Heppolette and Grealish to keep an eye out for any signs that the physical and verbal abuse he was getting might start to affect his performance. In a Cup game against Derby County in 1975 he was brought on as a substitute and started to destroy the left back, with his pace and agility. During the game a couple of Derby players gave him some verbal abuse with one reportedly saying, 'Here's the banana between my feet, monkey: come and get it.' No doubt this was just seen as gamesmanship and all part of the game by a pair of experienced pros trying to gain a psychological advantage over a tricky young opponent, but Petchey was irritated enough by it to single out that game as a spiteful example of the sustained abuse Cunningham received. Yet he also approved of his reaction to the kicks and barbs: 'The left back gave him an unmerciful kicking, people

were throwing bananas on the pitch. At half-time he asked me, "What do I do about the bananas?" I said collect them up and give them to the linesman. Don't worry about it. He didn't but he saw the funny side.' He adds that he generally advised him to '"Walk away, don't ever show them that you have been hurt, or that you resent it, just walk away." And to his credit he did that. I never saw him retaliate or do something to show that he'd been hurt. He'd often come off the pitch and he'd be very quiet and it was then that one of the players would sort him out. "Paddy" Grealish looked after him a lot; he was buoyant, you couldn't subdue "Paddy", he was good, especially with Laurie.'

By early 1975 Orient were gaining a reputation as an improving footballing side and Cunningham was given an extended run in the first team for the last quarter of the season. He was great to watch and caught the eye with his distinctive, upright and on-his-toes running style, looking like a black Nureyev gliding across the Brisbane Road mudbath *en-pointe* as if it were the stage of the Royal Ballet. The ballet comparison is not inappropriate. Cunningham appreciated the strength and agility of professional dancers, in particular ballet dancers, whom he admired for their poise and control – and astonishingly was offered a place on tour with the US ensemble The Dance Theatre of Harlem when its founder Arthur Mitchell wrote to the club stating his admiration for the player. In a letter he described Cunningham as 'the best athletic mover I have seen in ten to fifteen years teaching dance ... incredible control of movement, with the ability to stop quickly and turn quickly.' It was an offer Cunningham gave serious thought to, even asking the baffled Petchey if he

should say yes to it: who had to remind him it was he who paid his wages each week.

In an attempt to change his players' mental attitude Petchey introduced stretching exercises based on ballet warm-ups to his training sessions and brought in a trampolinist to demonstrate core muscle fitness and agility. Innovations like these must have struck a chord with Cunningham's open-minded, alternative view of life. He took an interest in yoga and started taking karate lessons with his best friend Bert. Martial arts were popular at the time and crossing over into mainstream popular culture and the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan were favourites with Cunningham and Fisher on their trips to the West End. The maturing teenager was starting to think about the mental side of his game more too and beginning to realise that if his head was clear and focused it would help improve his performance on the pitch. In what is now known in sporting parlance as 'being in the zone', he told a reporter in January 1976, 'I've only scored four goals this season and I need to sharpen up my game in front of goal. I've hardened my mental approach since taking up yoga. Before a game I sit quietly in the corner of the dressing room and think about what I must do out on the pitch. The silent spell helps my concentration.'

Getting his players to slow down and think about the game in this way proved an uphill task for Petchey who struggled to get the philosophy of push and run over to his squad. Basic football training can very quickly become dull. In an effort to freshen things up and to stop his players simply kicking the ball as far and as hard as they could, Petchey introduced basketball into daily training. His hope

was the players would think quickly on their feet, release the ball and move into space for a return pass. The reality proved to be less beneficial as players soon began to run with the ball and play rugby with it instead. He admitted ruefully, 'If you couldn't get it with their hands you weren't going to get it with their feet.' Cunningham's natural athleticism stood out and he excelled at everything from cross-country runs and sprints to smaller, more spontaneous pieces of skill that marked him out as special. Fisher recalls a simple move that summed up Cunningham's off-the-cuff unconventional mind. During training one day the ball landed on the top of the net above the goal. Usually somebody would jump up and punch the ball back out and on to the ground and the game would continue, but on this occasion Cunningham walked casually up to the goal. 'It was a real throwaway thing. He just came up and did a scissors kick and flipped it out and as it came out he caught the ball with his foot, controlled it, and rolled it back out to a teammate.' Superb natural fitness, evident since childhood, impressed his manager: 'Laurie was a great athlete. He could run like a deer and that was his greatest strength. We did cross-country at a police training centre near Croydon, and it was hard, it had 150 steps on the course. Laurie would do it and not break sweat.'

As the 1976 season progressed Cunningham's name was starting to attract praise in the local press. In a match against Fulham he gave World Cup legend and former England captain Bobby Moore a torrid afternoon, which he rounded off by scoring the winning goal. His electrifying pace and terrific stamina frightened most defenders, who, in

struggling to keep up, attempted to stop him with crushing high tackles. In order to survive he relied on his extraordinary balance to ride challenges without breaking stride in a flowing continuous move resembling a tap dancer's barrel roll. The ability to outfox antagonistic players with such elan gracefully highlighted the gulf between him and his more flat-footed opponents. In the book *Leyton Orient Greats* by Matt Simpson, Orient fan Tom Collins remembered the pride home fans felt watching him play: 'We knew that we had something special and could never understand the hate and vilification towards black people. There was this very proud thing about Laurie being at the Orient. Laurie had attitude and ability in a team full of triers and workhorses. It was almost as if he was imposing a reverse superiority, telling all around him that black people were superior to their white players.'

The dressing-room meditation before games began to pay off as Cunningham started scoring goals more regularly, increasing his strike rate to eight goals for the season from thirty-five starts, not perhaps the most impressive tally, but enough to make him top scorer for the club that season. Again in *Leyton Orient Greats*, the *Walthamstow Guardian* report on one goal scored against Hull City reads: 'Laurie Cunningham's excellence lifted him above the other players and left Hull City gasping. He scored a marvellous goal and conjured up several more chances. The home side were anxiously searching for a breakthrough when Cunningham pulled out one of his many tricks in the thirty-fourth minute. He took the ball, controlled it on the edge of the box, looked up and chipped it precisely into the far corner over

the keeper's head. It was a goal that would have graced any ground in the country.'

The improvement in Cunningham's concentration levels was encouraging for his manager but his idiosyncrasies remained. There were days when his focus was elsewhere and in one instance he vanished for an entire week. Missing a day's training in Cunningham's case was not wholly unexpected but when he did not turn up the next day, an angry Petchey asked Fisher to go and find him. Repeated telephone calls to the Cunningham home went unanswered and as Saturday came there was still no sign of the missing player. Puzzlement turned to concern: missing a game, especially a home game, without good reason was just not done. Kick-off came and went and to add insult to injury Orient were beaten. The mood at the team meeting the following Monday morning was downbeat. Ten minutes after it had begun footsteps were heard moving softly along the tiled corridor outside. Fisher recognised his friend's unhurried, gliding walk. After a few choice words Petchey asked Cunningham where he had been all week. The surprising reply came back that he had been at home and did not have the bus fare to get in and there was nobody else to borrow it from. When pressed as to why, if he had been at home all week, he hadn't answered the telephone, he replied because it was downstairs and he was upstairs. Fisher puts this down to 'a little bit of insanity' on Cunningham's part; it is certainly eccentric behaviour and Petchey seems to have accepted it as part and parcel of who Cunningham was, reflecting more than once, 'He was some character, I can tell you.' Maybe it was some form of mild behavioural disorder

which in those days might be put down to moodiness or arrogance.

The football writer Brain Glanville, who had a fondness for Orient and admired what Petchey was trying to achieve at the club, wrote a cover piece for the *Sunday Times Magazine* in March 1976 asking, 'Will Laurie Cunningham be the first coloured footballer to play for England?' In it he identifies what he considers his subject's character flaw: 'Cunningham for all his courtesy and enthusiasm will periodically vanish to the bewilderment of his family as much as the club, however often they fine him for it.' The article puts Cunningham in the context of the black footballers who had gone before him in the English game and relishes the prospect of him and similar players breaking through into the full national side, asking, 'If Laurie Cunningham could only play for England who knows what energies might be unleashed?' Infuriatingly for Glanville, who must have sympathised with Petchey, the arranged interview with Cunningham never took place because he vanished again; instead Glanville spent two hours drinking tea with his mother Mavis at the family home in Tottenham. To his credit he still profiled the player with equanimity.

It was rare for a footballer to grace the cover of the *Sunday Times Magazine*, let alone a black one from a lowly Second Division club. Cunningham's profile was dramatically raised by the coverage and his name began to spread beyond the world of football. His photograph began to appear in more and more magazines and on television. Like George Best before him he was starting to become a pop culture personality who represented something more than just football.

4

YOUNG HEARTS RUN FREE

Laurie Cunningham liked to sketch and paint, could play the piano and appreciated architecture. In the conservative world of English football he was something of a Renaissance man. He was fastidious about clothes and took great care over his appearance. He understood the tactile quality of cloth and how it affected the cut and drape of a garment. Silk was his favourite material. Even since his school days he had dressed in a distinctive and precise way – even within the limitations of school uniform he made amendments and additions to make himself stand out. His friend Robert Johnson recalls the impression he made: 'Anything in fashion Laurie would have it before anybody regardless of race, colour, creed; by the time he was fifteen years old you could see the change in him, see he loved to dress up. Whenever you went somewhere you never knew what Laurence was going to come as.'

Cunningham's interest in clothes placed him at the centre of a London fashion elite that sprang from the streets and dance halls of inner-London. Its members, a small group of working-class taste-makers, created an original yet retro look in the dive bars, pub back rooms and sweatboxes of London's fledgling nightclub scene. The black soul boys are briskly skimmed over in the history of British youth culture yet they were at the vanguard of fashion and music in the mid-1970s. Almost too few in number to be called