

Hart's in the right place

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action. Mike Ward unearths the individuals who have one thing in common... a love of the Albion



The problem with interviewing Ian Hart is that I can't. Or not very well, put it that way. We've been mates for so many years, we instinctively drift off at tangents the whole time, rambling on about total twaddle.

Two minutes in, and we've already found ourselves talking about last night's telly, good and bad. Plus *X Factor* ("past its sell-by date"). Oh, and that *Survivors* series we both loved but which the Beeb recently axed, mid-storyline, the clueless idiots.

And at one point, don't ask me how, our conversation has suddenly switched to the subject of an ex-BBC weatherman who retired more than 30 years ago (Bert Ford, since you ask) and whether we can each remember where we were when his last forecast went out. What the hell's that all about?

So, come on, Hart, let's stick to the football questions or we'll be here all day. Tell you what, let's start by you telling me all about your role on the Seagulls Player web telly thingummy. Looks like a dream gig for a bloke who's been following the Albion for nearly 40 years.

"*Hart Of The Matter?* It's exactly what it says on the tin," says Ian, "going and talking to fans. It's sticking a microphone under their noses, chatting about this and that. It's basically pub talk, but on the web.



"The exciting thing is how this will develop at the Amex. I'm very lucky to be working with Paul Camillin (Albion Press Officer) and Tim Dudding (Webmaster). Paul was one of my fanzine sellers back in the *Gull's Eye* years.

"Match-day television will be huge at the new stadium. We'll look to entertain people on the big screens in the lounges from lunchtime onwards.

"And there'll be a show people can watch straight after the games. They won't want to rush home for *Doctor Who!*"

So does Ian miss the BBC Sussex fans' phone-in? After all, he hosted it for 11 years. "It was a big part of my life," he admits, "but you have to move on. It was ultimately my decision to go. And I've got the utmost respect for the people who've followed me.

"I do miss aspects of it – Dick Knight and I had some great spats – but there are other aspects I don't miss. Some of the abuse I got I probably didn't handle as well as I could have done. But then we're all sensitive souls underneath.

"I remember coming back really late from an away match at Barnsley one Saturday and rather stupidly went on the computer. I saw the show I'd just done had been absolutely slaughtered. It made me start to question things, having given up all that time for it."

Ian's sense of perspective largely stems from the fact he's worked in the funeral business for 23 years – these days heading up his own company in Worthing.

"I was offered a couple of days' work at the end of 1987, helping out at a local firm," he recalls. "and the rest is history. The number of funerals I've been involved with now must be getting on for five figures.

"It's a business I suppose I was always destined to go into. My great-grandad and grandad did it.

"And yes, it certainly helps put things in perspective on the football front. I remember one Tuesday night at Gillingham, when Jeff Wood was in charge, and we'd just lost 3-0, I think, to Cambridge United. I was confronted by this really angry Albion fan, yelling right in my face for backing the manager. Just a few hours earlier I'd handled the funeral of a teenage lad who'd died in really tragic circumstances. It just made me think some people need a reality check."

Moving on to the Amex, how will lifelong fan Ian feel about supporters



who'll be watching the team for the very first time?

"Newcomers, oldcomers – give them a minute in there and they'll all be supporting the Albion," he says. "All that matters is they come and they stay, simple as that.

"I'm not going to be part of that clique that looks at these fans and goes. 'Where were you when we were s***?'"

"Did anybody have a go at me when I celebrated our goal at the Goldstone against Pompey on Easter Monday, 1973 – even though I'd never been before..? Of course not. The bloke standing next to me didn't say, 'You can't celebrate because you've never been before.'"

"There'll be a show people can watch straight after the games. They won't want to rush home for Doctor Who!"

Over the years, what elements of football does Ian think have changed for the worse?

"I think there's too much money in the game now," he says. "Manchester City are paying more to Yaya Toure as an annual salary than the Albion got for the Goldstone! That's frightening.

"Also, managers don't get a chance anymore. I know it's a results business but that's been taken to mad extremes."

Nonetheless, Ian thinks there's room for optimism – or could be, provided we invest in our youngsters. Running Ferring Under-16s, it's something he feels very strongly about.

"It's all very well the Government going and fighting other people's wars," he says, "but if Tony Blair had had that much money in the pot, why didn't every middle school in this country get an AstroTurf pitch, so that kids could go and play sport regardless of the weather?"

"We must always strive to put our kids first. Every building needs a firm foundation and it's the same with society. Get our kids doing things they enjoy, whether it's sport, drama, dance, art or whatever, and we're investing in our country's future."