

Martin's Boxing Clever!

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action on a Saturday. Journalist Mike Ward goes behind the scenes at Albion to discover who's helping to make the club tick. First up, Chief Executive and new stadium supremo Martin Perry...

HERE'S a little-known fact for you. Design-wise, the origins of our swish new state-of-the-art American Express Community Stadium at Falmer – or the Amex, as we're now very happy to call it – dates back half a century.

And the original design was fashioned from wooden crates.

I'll let Martin Perry explain, seeing as it's the Albion's Chief Executive, sat chatting with me in the stadium project office at Withdean (yes, Withdean), who's just imparted this extraordinary piece of information.

"Even as a kid I'd shown an aptitude for building things, which was why my dad decided I should go to technical college," Martin tells me. "In those days you used to bring fruit and veg home from the greengrocer in these wooden boxes, most of which got thrown on the fire.

"I used to collect the boxes and build things in our back garden – one of which was this structure that rose up and had an arch across. Honestly!

"So you could say the start of this stadium was 50-odd years ago, in the back garden of 21 Hangleton Road, Brighton!"

"I don't think people realised just what they'd be getting. To see them now, the emotion it provokes, is fantastic"



It was from that address ("later they changed it to Tivoli Crescent North, which is awful") that Martin says he first remembers hearing the distant roar of the Goldstone. And it wouldn't be long before he joined the Albion faithful. "One of the players came into my school," he recalls, "and I was hooked from that moment on..."

Fast-forward a good many years, to 1996, and Martin took a call that would change his life – inviting him back down from Huddersfield, where

he'd been heavily involved in the development of what's now called the Galpharm Stadium, to help his hometown club in their hour of need.

Except it wouldn't turn out to be an hour. "This stadium has now been part of my life for 14 years," he reflects. "I live, eat, breathe and sleep it."

The difference now, of course, is it's no longer merely a vision. It's there for real. Or a fair chunk of it is. More than enough to make jaws hit the floor.

"It was 10 years ago that we sat in the architect's office and developed this design concept, simulating the roll of the Downs. To see it actually appear is unbelievably exciting.

"But what's most thrilling is the reaction of fans, and of the city in general. Everyone who sees it thinks, 'Oh, wow!' They'd seen the images, but no image could do it justice.

I don't think people realised just what they'd be getting. To see them now, the emotion it provokes, is fantastic. And the fact people have fought for it so hard means they're appreciating it so much more."

All of this has come, of course, at a tricky time for the building industry. "The recession," Martin admits, "hit at just the wrong moment. We could have been in a situation where we'd got the go-ahead but couldn't actually move."

But, for once, good fortune has been on the project's side.

"I look back now and think we're so lucky," he adds. "Tony Bloom being where he was at the right moment – unbelievable, just unbelievable."

Martin is also proud of the way the club has engaged with those who'd initially opposed the project. "In fairness to Lewes District Council, they've been tremendous – utterly professional.

"We've also had monthly meetings with residents. They've even been on a stadium tour. I think people have realised it's superb. Much of the opposition has melted away. I'm sure some of the Falmer villagers will be buying season tickets!"

Martin points out that the stadium will out-spec even Wembley in many regards – and no, not just the pitch.

"We have great facilities, finished to a high standard.

We'll have cutting-edge matchday TV, nearly all the hospitality suites will have a pitch view – and even coming into the ground will be a more pleasant experience. Just swipe your card through the stainless steel barrier and you'll be in."

Martin agrees modern stadiums can sometimes be soulless, but says: "We're having a competition for local artists, including fans, to provide artwork we can put on the walls. It'll completely 'Albionise' the concourses. I've not seen that done anywhere to this extent."

After so many years of collective toil, then, the Falmer dream is coming true. But come on, Martin, be honest – you'll miss dear old Withdean just a smidgen, won't you?

"I won't," he insists. "I recognise it's an indelible part of our history. We wouldn't have survived without it, and we've had some great football moments here. But I won't shed a tear when we go.

"I will, however, shed a tear when we kick off at the new stadium. That first day will be unreal."

Mike Ward is the TV Critic of the Daily Star and the Daily Express Saturday Magazine. Hear him on talkSPORT's Hawksbee & Jacobs Show every Monday at 3pm. More at www.mikeward.tv

