

Blues chairman's plan to

Exclusive by Nicholas Tunney

ANDREW HOWARD is a man with a firm plan.

Since taking the reins as chairman of Wycombe Wanderers in the summer of 2014, he has drastically stabilised a club that was in huge financial trouble.

When he first started his new role at Adams Park, the Chairboys just stayed in the Football League by the skin of their teeth, infamously beating Torquay in their very last game of the 2013/14 season - amid scenes of delirium on the pitch but potentially dark times ahead of it.

There was also huge uncertainty about the future, with Wasps rugby club leaving a few months later after 12 years, raising yet more fears about the club's dwindling finances.

He immediately set about instigating a five-year plan and on Tuesday evening, Howard spoke exclusively to the Bucks Free Press to give a detailed insight into what that plan entails.

He said: "It was a very hard time for the club when I came in. It had been taken over by the trust and I think they had done a miraculous job just to keep it surviving but it was in a tough way.

"The best way to liken it would be we were in casualty with lots of pipes sticking out of us. The attraction for me was being a business person and being in that situation.

"In the second year as the team developed and as the finances got a little better, we weren't quite at death's door but we were still in casualty.

"From a footballing point of view, we tailed off a bit as the season progressed but the Aston Villa games were a wonderful experience for all of us.

"This year we set a positive budget, it is the first budget we set that has been a positive as everything else has been a negative and we have



financially beaten all of the budgets and we have made a small profit each year which is fantastic.

"For me the journey is just to survive. The club has been around for 130 years and it is a legacy and I wouldn't want to be the one at the helm when it all went horribly wrong and I want to pass it over to the next person and make sure it is in a better condition than when I took it on."

In Howard's first full season at Adams Park, the Blues almost went the other way and so nearly gained promotion to League One, but they lost on penalties to Southend United in the playoff final at Wembley.

Although fans, players and staff alike would have been in ecstasy had the club pulled off that feat, Howard said it would have been an absolute disaster financially had promotion been achieved.

He added: "After the game, I shook the Southend United CEO's hand and said 'Thank God you got it and not us'.

"It would have been a financial disaster for us. The way the solidarity

payments are made and the deals that were in place at the time and all the incentives that were there, we would have been knackered.

"Unashamedly, I think we would have been in a worse spot than we were a year earlier and I don't think people understand the implications of going up.

"You always want a team to do well but financially, what's the point of putting yourself in that situation.

"I said to the board early on that the best thing we could have done that season was get to the playoff final and lose.

"What is exciting now is that this season has been a typical League Two season. We didn't start great, had a fantastic run and now we are in a quiet period.

"It is all about the team that carries momentum forward now and if we get to the playoff final, I will be the one that is saying let's win it this time please as I now believe we can cope with going up to League One and at the end of the five-year plan, to be in a position where we are a stable League One club.



Wasps players bowed out in front of a huge crowd in their last game at Adams Park in the winter of 2014



Wasps left Adams Park in 2014, months after Howard took over at the Wanderers

Howard: Gareth is a winner who will kick us on

WYCOMBE WANDERERS chairman Andrew Howard gave his full backing to Gareth Ainsworth in an exclusive interview with the Bucks Free Press, explaining that the 44-year-old is the man to lead the Chairboys into a brighter era.

Since stepping into the role in the summer of 2014, Howard has been extremely impressed with the way the Lancastrian galvanises his players, trains them and conducts himself and he is more than happy to see him at the helm for years to come.

With the squad on the brink of the playoffs this season, as well as going on two excellent cup runs, Howard is convinced that the team will taste success under Ainsworth.

He said: "I definitely think he is the person to take us forward.



I think his attitude and his ethos fits with the club brilliantly.

"We don't say anything other than we are a humble club and we are a club that fights against the odds and we like

being the underdog.

"As far as that goes I think it is really important that he matches that as a manager. I think his attitude to people matches the way we want to do things.

Howard added: "Gareth is a winner. He wants to win and he is a leader you want to have on the footballing side who knows how to win and that will inspire everyone in his team to win."

Ainsworth's record as manager at Wycombe makes for excellent reading. He has almost a 40 per cent win ratio which is above average for managers in the lower echelons of the Football League.

The season after their great escape at Torquay, Ainsworth guided his squad to the 2015 League Two playoff final at Wembley, where Wanderers suffered a heartbreaking penalty shootout defeat to Southend United.

Last season saw the Chairboys yet again make a challenge for promotion but they fell away during the latter stages of the season

as injuries to key players took their toll.

This season, Wanderers sit nicely poised just on the heels of the top seven and with some favourable fixtures coming up, it could finally be their season.

As well as a decent league campaign, Wanderers have had two stellar cup runs in the FA Cup and Checktrade Trophy.

They lost to Coventry 2-1 in the semi-final of the Checktrade Trophy despite an excellent second half performance.

However, their agonising 4-3 last-gasp defeat to Spurs will go down as one of the greatest ever performances by a Wanderers side in their history.

Howard will be hoping that their promotion run has a happier ending.

see the good times return



Andrew Howard has a five-year plan for Wycombe Wanderers that is currently well on track to be met both on and off the pitch. Photos: Anita Ross Marshall

"Financially we are secure enough with the basic payment changes and with the contracts we have for the players, it would be a fantastic reward for the players and the club to be playing football in League One next year."

This season, Wycombe have embarked on two glorious runs in two domestic cup trophies, the FA Cup and the Checktrade Trophy.

Unfortunately, Wanderers bravely bowed out to Spurs in the FA Cup fourth round after a quite magnificent performance to scare the life out of the Premier League superstars.

The 53-year-old explained that he was delighted with the draw, but as a business person he would have loved to draw a team whose stadium has a larger capacity.

"I was driving up to Blackpool with Gareth and I was absolutely thrilled. There is a side of me that would have rather had a bigger club," commented the chairman.

"The capacity at Tottenham isn't great at 33,031. The business side of me said 'Oh great, it's a Premier League club but we could have gone to a stadium the size of Newcastle in the Championship'.

"You either want a club you can beat or a club you can take loads of money out of. As it turned out we played a club that we could beat and

take loads of money out of so it was a double winner for us."

Back to business, and Howard lauded the help of the 500 Club, who were set up last year to help finance the signings of players identified by Wycombe as realistic targets.

In January, the likes of Sam Saunders were signed with the help of the 500 Club and Howard explained how they assist in their role.

He said: "What is critical with any situation like this is you can't keep asking fans for more money.

"What we have to do is go forward. The 500 Club was put together last year and the 500 Club was an opportunity for the fans to say 'I am going to put my hard-earned cash into the club but I want it going to the playing side'."

"We were on this fantastic run and what was critical was that cash could be used to support what we were going to do.

"We knew we were going to Tottenham at that stage and we knew we were in a good place as regards to the Checktrade Trophy so it was time for us to show the fans that we have aspirations from a footballing point of view.

"Everyone gets bored of me going on about the commercial side and the transfer window in January was all about saying we have ambition and do not under-estimate how



Wycombe's chairman spoke exclusively to Bucks Free Press reporter Nicholas Tunney about how the club is operating now under his tenure

hard Gareth and his team worked to bring these players in.

"When you look at who we brought in, I think it is pretty impressive and hopefully the fans understand that every single spare penny we have, we are trying to put onto the football pitch."

With Wanderers sitting just five



Wycombe's players get into a huddle before their FA Cup clash against Spurs back in January. Heartbreakingly, they lost 4-3



A Wycombe fan getting right behind her team at White Hart Lane during that famous clash

points off the playoffs, attention turns to the run-in and Howard said if the Chairboys get there, every part of him will be backing his side to finally get that promotion.

He added: "It is so close this season and whoever gets into the playoffs will have earned their money getting there, but if it is us then I

will be the loudest voice, trust me.

"It's not just about the money but really as a mark of what this group of people both on and off the pitch deserve because I think they have done a tremendous job in taking a basket case and turning it into something they can be very proud of."

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GRAHAMGape's
playoff
ambition

CHAIRBOYS midfielder Dominic Gape is confident that Wanderers can achieve their playoff ambitions, as long as they keep performing to a high standard.

The former Southampton midfielder has been in fine form for the Blues this season since signing on loan from the Saints in the summer.

He made the move permanent in January and has been one of Wycombe's most consistent performers.

Gape explained that he felt Wanderers deserved more than a pair of draws from their last two games and wants the boys to kick on against Hartlepool tomorrow.

He said: "I think four points from the Blackpool and Plymouth games would have been a fair reflection rather than two.

"Starting with Hartlepool, we are now facing teams down the other end of the table as these games will be just as tough as facing teams at the top.

"We have to take the same approach against the teams lower down and as long as we do that, I think we will be fine. However, they are going to be fighting so it will be tough. Every game will be like that at the moment."

Wycombe seem to have overcome their sticky recent form, as they are currently on a four-match unbeaten run.

Gape said the mood in the camp is upbeat and added: "We spoke about ending the drought when we got the draw away at Accrington and now we have turned a corner.

"We are on the up and haven't lost since so long may that continue and I just hope we can turn a few of these draws into wins.

"If we take care of business and pick up wins, football can change so quickly. Teams are going to drop points as this is pressure time."

Jamal's
Pot luck

JAMAL BLACKMAN has been the scourge of Blackpool this season, but his latest penalty save didn't take any analysing beforehand.

Blackman was in supreme form between the sticks on Saturday and made a string of saves, including an 87th minute penalty from Brad Potts.

However, the on-loan Chelsea stopper revealed that he hadn't seen any footage of Potts taking penalties as opposed to other penalty takers in the league.

He said: "We go through the videos that everyone takes but I actually hadn't watched Potts take a penalty due to the fact he hadn't taken one this season so I gambled and it paid off.

"Fortunately it was a good decision although was slightly lucky."

Ainsworth satisfied
with Pilgrims point

Weston was a thorn in Plymouth's side. Photos: Anita Ross Marshall

WYCOMBE WANDERERS and Plymouth Argyle shared the spoils in an enthralling 1-1 draw at Adams Park, but the home side will rue the fact that they missed some great chances to put the game to bed.

Myles Weston gave the Chairboys the lead on 18 minutes when he superbly placed a side footed volley past Luke McCormick from Michael Harriman's terrific cross.

However, substitute Nathan Blissett equalised moments after coming on as he planted an excellent header beyond the reach of Jamal Blackman into the far corner on 74 minutes.

Wanderers had several opportunities to extend their advantage but couldn't find the net when it mattered most, most notably when Dominic Gape headed straight at McCormick when it would have been easier to score.

Manager Gareth Ainsworth was pleased with his side's display, especially in the first half when they had those opportunities to extend their advantage.

He said: "In the first half we played really well. I thought we sustained attacks and during the whole game we had the better chances.

"Jamal made one save where he

tipped it over the bar and then they score the header that loops in and there are details of that goal that I need to iron out.

"It was disappointing but on the plus side Gape had a great chance to win the game and Will De Havilland had a chance when he first came on.

"Their keeper was busier than ours but I am pleased. I know we are at home and our fans want us to win but it's Plymouth Argyle.

"They have been at the top of the league for three years now and it is about time they got out of this league.

"Myles was excellent and Bayo was outstanding again and we now have some winnable games.

"It is sure to be an exciting end to the season."

Plymouth playmaker Graham Carey was kept quiet by a combination of Gape and Marcus Bean and Ainsworth admitted that this was a plan he had in mind before the match.

He added: "Carey is one of the best players in the league and Marcus is probably one of the best players in the league at not allowing people a free run.

"They shared responsibility and I thought they both did well."



Akinfenwa and Luke O'Nien in discussion



Akinfenwa makes life hard for the Plymouth Argyle defence

Winger wants Wanderers to kick on

MYLES WESTON said he and the team were slightly aggrieved that they didn't take maximum points against the Pilgrims on Tuesday evening.

The winger gave the Chairboys the lead before a late equaliser dealt Wanderers a cruel blow in a game where they played very well on the whole.

Weston said: "I think we were the better team. To concede from a

set-piece was disappointing but the lads did well so we can take the positives out of that.

"I feel like we have got to keep on working and grinding out and the wins will come again. I truly believe we can go on a run again like we did before and that could get us in the playoffs.

"To be four unbeaten we just need to turn the draws into wins and that would be a big bonus for us."

On a personal note, the season so far has been frustrating for Weston who has seen his performances restricted by injuries and suspension.

However, the 29-year-old is upbeat for the rest of the season and feels he is hitting full fitness at just the right time.

He commented: "It is good to get a start. The squad is very good and when I came back from injury the lads were 16 games unbeaten so it

was hard for me to go to the gaffer and say put me in the team because they were winning.

"I am happy he gave me a chance in this game and hopefully I can stay in the team now."

With nine games of the season remaining, Weston added: "Every game is like a cup final now for us and we have to try and win every game and if we can go on a run that can get us into the playoffs."

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WYCOMBE: Gaffer heaps praise on young goalie's display

Keeper's heroics earn gritty point for Blues

CHAIRBOYS

GARETH AINSWORTH hailed the performance of Jamal Blackman against Blackpool on Saturday after the goalkeeper produced a series of superb saves to give Wycombe a vital point.

The on-loan Chelsea stopper also saved an 87th minute from Brad Potts after Max Muller was adjudged to have fouled Nathan Del-founeso in the area.

Ainsworth was delighted to see his number one back to his best. He said: "Jamal is Premier League quality.

"You look at some of the keepers in the Premier League and Jamal could do what they do.

"I think he has learnt a lot with us. His kicking especially, as in League Two that is what you have to do.

"He is a great lad. He listens, he is humble and he fits right in with his humility and he works so hard.

"I am really pleased we have got him as we needed him there."

Overall, the results went Wycombe's way as they now sit just three points off the playoffs.

Ainsworth added: "I am pleased with a point. We had a couple cleared off the line and we had a couple of scrambles but nothing too clear-cut.

"Bayo won a lot of headers and flick-ons but we just didn't get anything to fall to us.

"That was the tale of the game. We



Ainsworth was happy that his Wanderers side managed to get a draw from a tough game against Blackpool. Photo: ARM Images

nullified each other and Blackpool are a good side and for me it is a point gained."

However, on the injury front, Ainsworth received a blow with the news that defender Anthony Stewart could well be out for the rest of the season with a knee ligament injury.

He commented: "It looks bad for Anthony and it is a blow for us.

"Having said that we have a great medical team there is no reason why they can't work a miracle and get Anthony back before the end of the season.

"It is time for the others to step up and fill his boots but they are big boots to fill."

During the game, Blackman had earlier denied Potts just seconds into the second half but his effort

from just four yards was somehow clawed away by the on-loan Chelsea stopper after great work by Del-founeso.

The Chairboys were not without their opportunities, however, and their best fell to Paris Cowan-Hall who saw his 25-yard thunderbolt superbly tipped wide by Dean Lyness on 41 minutes.

Blackpool started positively and Jordan Flores and Jack Payne saw two shots desperately blocked by the Wycombe defence before Joe Jacobson scrambled it clear.

The home side came back strongly a minute later when Sam Wood's cross was tipped away by goalkeeper Lyness before Marcus Bean's fierce drive was blocked.

On 10 minutes, Adebayo Akinfenwa had a good opportunity to keep his excellent form going but slashed his shot wide of Lyness' goal.

Three minutes later, a Jacobson corner caused mayhem and Blackpool cleared just before Akinfenwa could pull the trigger.

The Tangerines came the closest to breaking the deadlock on 23 minutes when Potts' cross beat Blackman but it hit the woodwork.

Akinfenwa almost grabbed the lead for the Chairboys on 54 minutes but he headed just over from Jacobson's pinpoint delivery.

However, thanks to Blackman's heroics, it turned out to be a well-earned point for Ainsworth's men who remain in the promotion hunt.



In the Chair

COLUMN: O'Nien on away day travels



O'Nien expects a difficult match against Hartlepool tomorrow

IT'S a long trip to Hartlepool this weekend for the Wycombe. Although the bus journey up north on the Friday is very long, the boys have found many different ways to pass the time.

One table is big on its card games, which usually results in Scott Kashket having to buy the coffees at the services, although there is a new board game introduced to this table and I think Scotty has now found his forte.

Moving around to other parts of the bus, there are a few laptops out and headphones in as films pass the time for these guys. Towards the very back of the bus, I normally see Big AP (Aaron Pierre) spread out at the back resting up, and I wouldn't recommend disturbing him.

A new addition to the journey is the Nick Freeman Quiz, which he prepares in the first half of the bus trip. I've also seen a few autobiographies being read up and down the bus, while some are glued to their phones, and others including myself are slowly studying Spanish.

Last year there were three or four Nintendo Ds's amongst the boys and Mario Karts was the game. It was taken very seriously and there were some angry shouts up and down the bus as someone always drove over a banana and then red-shelled all in the space of a second, making them go from first to eighth. I assure you, this isn't a nice feeling.

This game has recently been replaced by Super Stick Man Golf 2 – it's a golf game, but it's simply the first ball in the hole gets the most points and the last person gets zero points. One player has nicknamed himself G.O.A.T (Greatest Of All Time), but don't be fooled by this, as I only ever see this name at the bottom of the table.

When we arrive at the hotel, the boys are in good spirits going into dinner, and this is normally boosted by a singsong, as there is sometimes a person on his first away trip that needs to complete an initiation.

Manager thinks experience will be vital on the run-in

WYCOMBE WANDERERS boss Gareth Ainsworth believes the experienced players in his squad will be vital as the club approaches the business end of the season.

The Chairboys remain in the promotion hunt as the table is getting extremely bunched up with just nine league fixtures left.

With players such as Paul Hayes, Matt Bloomfield, Marcus Bean, Adebayo Akinfenwa, Joe Jacobson and Sam Saunders at his disposal, Ainsworth explained that compared to last season he feels his side are better equipped to sustain a promotion challenge.

He said: "The experience of these guys is very important to us. Hayes came in a couple of seasons ago and I think he showed his experience straight from the word go.

"We had a great season and got to Wembley for the playoff final and he was almost an ever-present for us that year.

"Matt Bloomfield has been there and done it with Wycombe Wander-



Gareth Ainsworth believes the likes of Paul Hayes will be important over the final weeks of the season. Photo: Anita Ross Marshall

ers. He leads by example and both he and Paul Hayes are huge players for us.

"However, we also have the likes of Bayo who is having the season of his life and Joe Jacobson, who is becoming a senior figure now in the

team.

"We have some good leaders in the team and obviously Sam Saunders has done it at a very high level.

"I think the experience is there as well as the structure of the team and we have these youngsters such

as Luke O'Nien, who has been outstanding lately, Dominic Gape and Dayle Southwell.

"We have a good mix and we are looking forward to the next nine games."

Another leader in the squad is centre-half Aaron Pierre, who has just made a successful return from injury.

His usual defensive partner, Anthony Stewart, could well miss the rest of the season but Ainsworth is confident that the loss of Stewart is less of an issue now Pierre is fit and firing.

He added: "Positionally Aaron has got better in the last two games because he has had to. Between Aaron and Anthony there is probably 400 league games worth of experience there.

"I have looked and Aaron has taken up some really good covering positions for both Max and Will and I think he has come on as a player and I have been really proud of him in the last few games."

SPORT

Cricket

Hales back with a bang
with glorious century
- page 70



'Wycombe Wanderers were on life support'



- **Andrew Howard speaks exclusively to the BFP**

see pages 72 & 73

- **'Five-year plan on track'**
- **'2015 playoff final win would have been a disaster'**

Photo by Anita Ross Marshall