



Wycombe Wanderers' chairman Ivor Beeks dreams of reuniting the club once more with the town, and making football into family entertainment again

Ivor is building on firm foundations

IVOR LEONARD BEEKS sounds definitely suspicious on the phone. "Why d'you want to write about me?" he asks. "What have I done?" We discuss this and that, agreeing to meet at Saturday's football match.

Being his guest, entry to the boardroom — tea, coffee, whisky, sandwiches et al — is quickly granted. Mr Beeks still seems unsure about the project, posing for photographs with some reluctance. He is a person who clearly does not back into the limelight unlike chairmen of some soccer clubs.

After Wycombe Wanderers have won, maintaining an impressive sequence of victories, Ivor Beeks is more relaxed though still on his guard.

A few days later, at his offices behind The Old Courthouse in Hughenden Road, High Wycombe, that stance is initially maintained. We look at the brochures for the new hotel in which he's involved, The Alexandra, soon to be opened just opposite Loakes Park, the ground Wanderers are soon to desert for pastures new in Sands. It's a £1 million project providing South Bucks' most modern accommodation.

Mr Beeks declares he will not — and has not — made money out of the football club. He will from the hotel.

Not bad for a man who went to Sands Middle and Mill End Road schools and learned his trade in what was the Wycombe Technical Institute, then sited in Easton Street almost opposite Pann Mill.

Not unreasonable for a local guy whose first year's annual trading turnover in 1965 was £16,000, a figure expanded to around £4 million.

Pretty good for someone who's one of the backbones of the local Rotary movement (motto: Service Above Self), helper to the Salvation Army, former choirboy at All Saints Parish Church (1s.6d per funeral) and a builder who began mending taps and painting window frames and laying bricks himself.

That's why we're meeting in his impressive office. Ivor Beeks, aged 47, epitomises the local boy made good.

"Nothing schmaltzy," he insists. So nothing schmaltzy this will be.

His family have been in Wycombe since the mid-1930s, exiled from Wales by the Great Depression. He was brought up in the Marsh and Loudwater, his uncles already in the building trade.

"Never was an academic at school," he recalls, beginning to talk freely, albeit reluctantly. "My schoolmaster used to write that I'd do well if I put as much into my studies as I did into football.

"I took the building exam to enter the Institute because, frankly, it was the easiest one to pass."

From the Institute, having learned the rudiments of his trade, Mr Beeks joined Lovell's, then a private building firm with offices in Easton Street, Wycombe, now a huge company. Like any other youngster, he worked on building sites, expanding his experience.

From there, he was hired by Wycombe Rural District Council into its engineering department, helping with the major drainage schemes being carried out throughout the area, for instance in Wooburn and Stokenchurch.

Thence to Marlow Urban District Council, so comparatively small that everyone turned their hands to anything. The surveyor was Tommy Jackson ("tremendous man," says Ivor) and in his office worked an attractive young woman called Janet, the future Mrs Beeks.

"The trouble with local government," remarks Mr Beeks,

WITHIN weeks, South Bucks' newest hotel will open, the brainchild of a man called Ivor Beeks, a property developer who learned his business the hard way. He also runs the area's most important football club. Today, Free Press writer BOB PERRIN tells his story for the first time.

"is that the conditions are good, the experience is good but the pay is not good."

Thus, in 1964, a year before his marriage, he set up in business with a bricklayer called Syd Fountain. The firm was called Fountain and Partners. It had a small van and did very small jobs, mainly maintenance work for local estate agents who managed rented property in the town.

Towards the end of the 1960s, the company landed its first sizeable contract, to build four terraced houses in Mill End Road for the Bucks Water Board. A bungalow followed and, of course, more house extensions and alterations. In the early 70s, there were 40 and more houses in Chesham but, usually, Ivor Beeks stayed close to High Wycombe.

It was deliberate policy to concentrate on his home town. After all, his name was becoming known. Why try for work in areas where he was a stranger, where the advertising boards would have little effect?

"The cheapest form of advertising is a board outside a job," smiles Mr Beeks. "I often joke that if I see a pile of sand in the road I'll put a board on it."

The business grew gradually. "We've seen in our industry what happens to someone who grows fast," he says. In other words, they go bust — and messily. "There's a learning curve," he adds, agreeing that steady not spectacular progress is the way to woo the bank manager.

"There's luck in business," he continues, explaining his philosophy, "but I'm a great believer in making your own luck. You've got to read the market, to see the gaps in the market to be filled."

Mr Beeks frowns when freemasonry is mentioned, traditionally, many believe, the ladder to success for a builder and property developer.

"I wouldn't like to obtain business like that," he declares firmly. "I'm a believer that 50 per cent of success in business is selling yourself to a customer and then the next points are price and quality."

"And behind every successful man in business is a good lady. That's number one. The next is the staff around you. They have to be trustworthy and you don't want to have to keep looking over their shoulders."

"After all, if you know your job you shouldn't have to be supervised."

"You try to build relationships in a firm just as you do in a family and I look on us here as a family."

We talk about the new hotel. That project started when an estate agent offered the Beeks firm one house in Queen Alexandra Road after the owners had failed to win planning permission for it to be converted into flats. The house next door was also available.

The first idea was for an office block but the council turned

that down. Then, driving along a motorway, Ivor Beeks thought of the hotel plan. That was that.

"It was a speculative deal," he explains. "In the beginning I simply had two houses without any sort of planning permission."

"A bit like Del-boy's motto," I suggest. "Who dares, wins."

"A lot in that," he agrees, citing The Old Courthouse as a similar example. "It was derelict. No-one wanted to know," he says, "and now we've preserved something of High Wycombe."

So preservation and improvement equals profit. That seems to be the Beeks secret. He has been asked more than once if he was interested in entering local politics. He doesn't want to know. The Rotary Club is his love.

"Apart from getting married," he grins, "joining Rotary is the best thing I've ever done."

His respect for the Salvation Army is also well known. He believes the Army is strengthened by Rotary connections and vice-versa. Soon, some believe, Ivor Beeks might be helping the Army move into a new Citadel in the area but plans have yet to be finalised.

"What's a practising Christian?" he says in reply to a very personal question. "Going to church every Sunday doesn't necessarily make you that. My Christian ethics? Well, I like to think that if I can't do a good turn then I wouldn't do a bad one."

He pauses, adding quietly: "The one thing with me is always family. The lady has been a tower of strength through good times and bad."

And he confides that there had been some very lean business times back in 1971-72 when Beeks the builder might have gone under, might have returned to the little van and the tinier jobs.

Now, he's almost certainly a millionaire but family still comes first. Mark, the eldest son, runs the carpentry side of the business. Paul, at 20, is studying surveying at Brighton Polytechnic and Sarah is sweating on her A-levels at Lady Verney School. The "lady" helps out with the firm's accounts three days a week apart from running the family's beautiful home at North Dean.

Family is the key word for Ivor Beeks. As chairman of Wycombe Wanderers, he dreams of uniting that club once more with the town.

A youth scheme has been instituted, 60 or so youngsters training at Bisham Abbey each week. The new stadium will have a family stand. The old days of mum, dad and kids going to matches will return if he has his way.

Meanwhile, there's the next building project to plan, Rotary to attend, friends to help and advise.

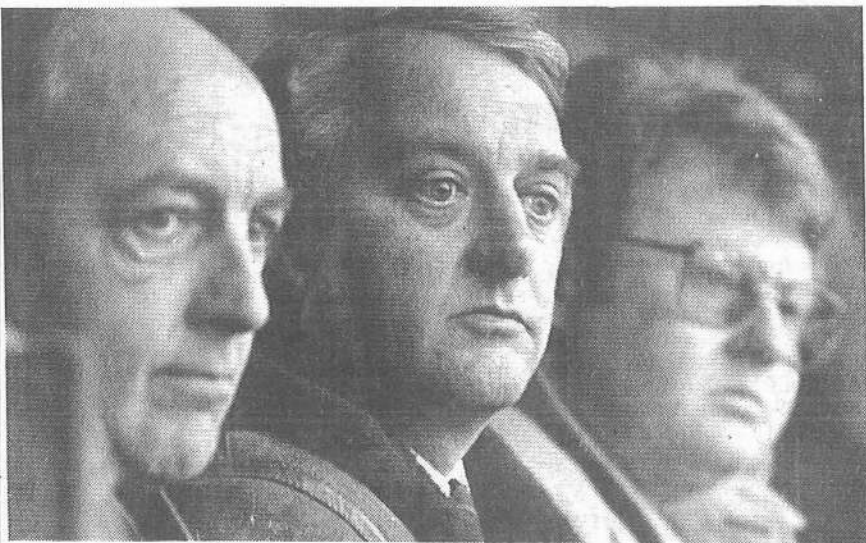
"I'd like to think I've given something to the town," Ivor Leonard Beeks sums up. His words, not mine.

Now, is that too schmaltzy?

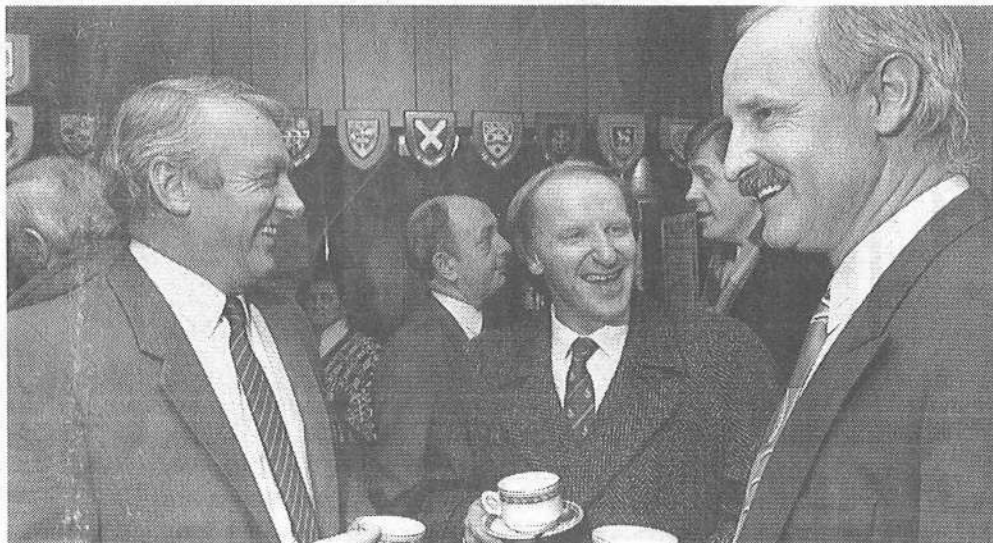
The only reason, I conclude, for his suspicion that others don't believe he should walk with business and sporting stars — and, perhaps, even higher — is that he's still not quite sure how hard-work and honesty have paid the dividends they have.

And, yes, that is schmaltzy. Sorry, Ivor Leonard Beeks. But you deserve it.

PICTURES BY ROB GLADSTONE



Walking with the famous: Ivor Beeks flanked by the FA's Graham Kelly and (left) the club's chief executive Brian Lee



Relaxing in the boardroom, Ivor Beeks, ITV's Alan Parry, the club's PR consultant and former player Keith Mead. Centre background, Brian Lee looks concerned