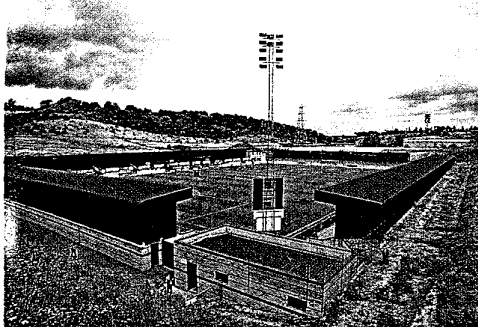


The little big men

Wycombe Wanderers are soccer's new romantics, says **Simon Barnes**



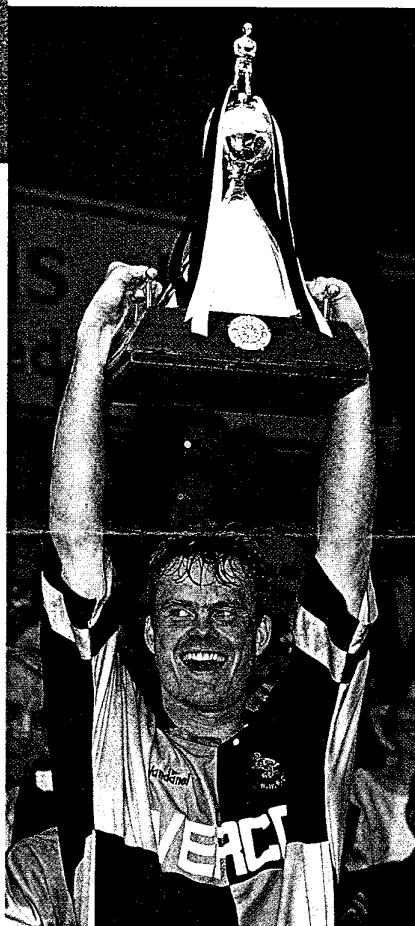
Dream on: above, Wycombe Wanderers' new ground, Adams Park, is a testament to footballing romance. Right, Keith Scott raises the Conference trophy

Romance? This is football's stock-in-trade, and it lurks in the oddest of places. Remorseless excellence and ceaseless impotent striving are the twin concerns of the inner city: Liverpool, Manchester United, Arsenal, Everton, Manchester City and Chelsea. But romance is the business of the suburbs. On the fringes, out in the boondocks, away from the cities, far from the conurbations of the Midlands and the north and surrounded by neighbours who don't think football is quite the thing to be associated with – there you find the heartland of footballing romance.

Last season, I went to Yeovil to seek romance, and to see the lads take on Arsenal in the cup. Cup Fever Grips Sleepy West Country Town! So there I was, drinking away in a jolly townlet with a barman who said "Cheers mate", a townlet with a pronounced London overspill element and an industrial estate on the fringes. That was where Yeovil's smart new football ground could be found, and there Plucky Little Yeovil went out to do their romantic thing and duly got stuffed.

Or take Watford, a team from the boonies surfing to the first division on inspired management and Elton John's lolly: a place that is never sure whether it is a suburb of London or a town in its own right. Or Barnet, mighty Barnet, much the same kind of place. Or Wimbledon, a grubby club on the wrong side of the tracks from the All England Lawn Tennis Club, that pursued its dreams of glory in the shadow of the dog-track and speedway stadium next door.

But one of the oldest and most romantic names in footballing history is High Wycombe. The same pattern holds true: a not-quite town, a commuter suburb, a London overspill centre. And their team, Wycombe Wanderers is suffused with romantic dreams.



Dylan Thomas wrote prettily of a "cap-sized field", favourite playing place of his childhood. Wycombe Wanderers used to play on just such a field called Loakes Park. The pitch tilted like the Titanic and the opposition foundered. An impossible slope ran right across from one touchline to the next, so that the only sane option for a manager was to pick players who had one leg shorter than the other.

On this cap-sized field, they famously took on Jack Charlton's Middlesbrough side in the 1974-75 season. They held the first division big boys 0-0, went to Middlesbrough and came within a whisker of doing it once again. A last-minute goal sunk them, but they were applauded off the pitch, and just about every step of the way back to their impossible ground.

Wycombe have always dwelt in football's suburbs. They were founded as an amateur club, and their colours, Oxford and Cambridge blue, are a dead giveaway. They started playing in 1895, and took on teams like the 2nd East Lancs Regiment, Idlers, Reading Temperance, Vampires and, believe it or not, West Bromwich Albion.

They won the FA Amateur Cup in 1931, and were pillars of the Isthmian League from 1956 through 1987, winning the title eight times. But in time they dared to nurture wider ambitions: non-League football is a pyramid and at its summit is the oddly named GM Vauxhall Conference. Only through these doors can the Football League be entered and last season, Wycombe Wanderers did it.

In one way, this is the ultimate romantic dream, but in another it is the death of romanticism. For a start, Wycombe no longer live at Loakes Park. They have moved out to a nice neat ground a little way out of town: yes, out on an industrial estate, in the local planning department's grand dream of the future.

This is called Adams Park, named for Frank Adams who bought Loakes Park and gave it to the club back in prehistory. They were able to sell the ground in the middle of the town for good money. Everything they have done has been a suburban tribute to practical common sense, good management and good husbandry.

Yet these qualities do not destroy romance. Take Martin O'Neill, their manager. His success with Wycombe naturally attracted the eye of the big clubs – he was seen as one to watch, one to snap up when the time was ripe. And when Brian Clough resigned from Nottingham Forest, who better than this Forest old boy to step in?

"I've a great affection for Forest, especially the fans," O'Neill said. "But I honestly couldn't leave Wycombe at such an exciting time. I would genuinely love to see Forest go right back to the top, and I have this silly little dream that I would love to see us join them."

O'Neill is clearly deeply infected with the romance of it all. "I am capable enough and big-headed enough to think that Wycombe can go on to great things," he said. The dream of the suburbs lives on ■