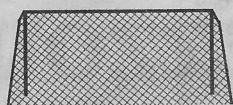


FAN'S EYE VIEW



No 75 WYCOMBE WANDERERS

Reality outstrips fantasy

QUENTIN HOLDEN

WE SOMETIMES get misty eyed at Adams Park. We reminisce about the old days, standing in the rusting old green sheds that surrounded the famous 11-foot slope that was Loakes Park. We think about the young lad who, at half-time, walked up the hospital end terrace with an enormous pole to move the hand of the decrepit clock from the 45-minute mark to zero, ready for the second half. We fondly recall losing 3-1 to Metropolitan Police in the first round of the FA Trophy. But was this Wycombe in pre-war England? Or perhaps the early Fifties? Well, it was 1989, actually.

Despite having a footballing history older than Liverpool, Wycombe Wanderers' success story is far more recent, and I don't claim to have followed them since birth. But I was there in the Jim Kelman days, when John Granville, Trinidad and Tobago's No 1, played in goal. I was also there when Sean Norman strode down the wing looking for Mark West and we were second from the bottom of the GM Vauxhall Conference.

Since Martin O'Neill's arrival in February 1990, there have been changes beyond any of my wildest footballing fantasies. Three visits and three victories at Wembley in four years, promotion to the Third Division, winning the GM Vauxhall Shield three times, and, in May this year, promotion to the Second Division after a 4-2 victory over Preston North End at Wembley. In addition we nearly beat Coventry City, of the Premiership, in the Coca-Cola Cup second round last season. After losing 3-0 away to Coventry at Highfield Road in the first leg, they came to Adams Park for the second leg. With 14 minutes of normal play left, Wycombe led 4-0 only to be denied by two late goals, losing 5-4 on aggregate and preventing one of the great upsets (and comebacks) for years.

When I meet other football fans and tell them who I support, they say "Wycombe! They're a brilliant little team" and shake my hand or pat me on the back as if it were me, and not Martin O'Neill, who had led them through an astounding four seasons. Wycombe so it would seem, are the darling buds of football.

Despite being 24, I can "hardly" await the arrival of my grandchildren to show them my programme collection. Picture the scene: in 40 years' time, I will climb into my loft, grab a dusty, crumbling old cardboard box stuffed to the brim with faded programmes and randomly pluck out a 1992-93 programme with Wycombe Wanderers v Kidderminster Harriers or Bromsgrove Rovers on the cover. With a deft Paul Daniels flourish, I will then turn over a 1993-94 season programme, blow away the dust and reveal the inscription Crewe Alexander v Wycombe 30 April, 1994. Then, just when their little eyes are like dinner plates, my finale will be to reach into the box and pull out a programme only three years older than the first, turn to the page with the photo of the visiting team at Adams Park, and a Birmingham City team of yesteryear will be stood grinning next to Karren Brady.

"But grandad," one of the little blighters will say, "how can Wycombe possibly have gone from playing Kidderminster Harriers to playing one of the great clubs from England's second city in only three seasons?" I will go misty eyed once again and say: "Martin O'Neill carried that secret to his grave, lad. . ."

But how did Martin O'Neill achieve all this success? His inspired helmsmanship involved astute mixtures of non-League youngsters, including Steve Guppy on the left wing (just bought by Kevin Keegan) and Jason Cousins at right-back, mixed with a healthy sprinkling of non-League / League stalwarts in the twilight of their playing careers, such as Kim Casey, Trevor Aylott and now Simon Garner. What he offered was a chance to end their career at a thriving little club, with excellent and realistic opportunities to earn a few more medals before retiring. In return, O'Neill was given a backbone of experience with which he steered "The Chairboys" through two promotions and numerous cups in four years.