

Adams spookily follows self-deprecating template of O'Neill

IT HARDLY seems any time ago that Wycombe Wanderers were giving Liverpool a run for their Premiership money in the FA Cup semi-final. That occasion, three seasons ago, brought thousands of amiable fans in the dark and light blue colours to Villa Park, where they saw their team offer a display of true grit under the direction of that grittiest of FA Cup campaigners – and indeed, thanks to his goal against Liverpool in the 1988 final, winner – Lawrie Sanchez.

When the granite-faced one spoke after his team's narrow defeat, he did not dwell on the day's exploits, preferring to discuss the challenges that lay ahead. How typical of football's fluctuating fortune that Sanchez should now be a back number in the managerial catalogue and his team an uncomfortable fixture at the bottom of the Second Division.

Can Tony Adams, football's New Man, get them moving back in the right direction following his appointment as the former Wimbledon man's permanent successor – starting with today's FA Cup first-round tie against Swindon?

Exhibiting the frankness of someone who has pulled themselves apart and put themselves carefully back together again with the assistance of Alcoholics Anonymous, Adams accepts that his progress is open to doubt. But even in his introductory press conference on Wednesday he spoke about his determination to use any experience – including that of getting the sack – as part of an upward curve.

And there does seem something entirely fitting about a man named Adams taking over a team that plays at Adams Park. It is the kind of spooky, name-check thing that went on when the last manager under whom Adams played, Arsène Wenger, took over at Arsenal. Call it fate, call it kismet, call it a load of old cobblers.

"We are what we learn," Adams announced, in AA-inspired lingo. Which makes him a potent managerial mixture of four men whom he has consulted before taking this first step in his second footballing career – George Graham, Arsène Wenger, Terry Venables and a previous incumbent at his new club, Martin O'Neill.

O'Neill's managerial career didn't



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quite start at Wycombe. Before he took over there he spent two months in charge at Shepshed Charterhouse – no, they only sound like a firm of accountants – before resigning because he felt the chairman was exerting undue influence.

But once O'Neill got his feet under the exquisitely crafted boardroom table at Adams Park – and his rear parked on one of the locally manufactured Windsor chairs featuring backs carved with the local emblem of a swan – Wycombe's stock began to rise sharply.

Adams has praised the man now in charge at Celtic most especially for his enthusiasm. It is not hard to see why. Listening to him being interviewed on television, or providing studio comment on World Cup matches, his *joie de sport* sings out.

On a misty Tuesday night 13 years ago I went down to a training session at Adams Park to interview O'Neill about his aspirations in what was his first season as manager of Wycombe, who were then in the GM Vauxhall Conference.

Within three years the former Northern Ireland captain would have them in the Football League, and a year later in the old Third Division. But as he spoke that evening, O'Neill was at least as cautious and self-deprecating as Arsenal's famed captain this week. Which was odd, given that his managerial template for the previous nine years had been supplied by Nottingham Forest's Brian Clough, never noted for his reticence on the subject of self.

"I'm envious of the lads getting their kit out every Saturday because I'm getting old and decrepit and can't

play," O'Neill remarked in his lilting fashion. "Some people would say I couldn't play when I was playing."

And when it came to assessing his capabilities as a person, he offered the following: "I'm opinionated on things I haven't got a clue about. I would call it sheer stupidity at the end of the day."

It was the opposite of a hard sell, and all the more charming for that. In the light of what O'Neill went on to achieve as a manager, including promotion, a Coca-Cola Cup win and European football for Leicester City and a major European final for Celtic last season, Adams can be said to have struck just the right note.

Personally, I shall never forget the consternation I caused in the Wycombe clubhouse that Tuesday night when I asked O'Neill what he would like to drink.

"I'll have a half of lager, please," I said. "No. Make that a pint. A pint of lager, please. No, no. I'll have a large shandy. Yes. Pint of lager shandy. My indecision is final."

There's one area of angst at least that Adams will be spared.