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Wasps' move a huge blow to town's economy

by **ALAN FELDBERG**
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WASPS' decision to leave High Wycombe will cost the South Bucks economy millions of pounds a year.

On Wednesday the club announced they would move permanently to Coventry's Ricoh Arena, playing their first match at their new stadium in December.

Wasps, who have 2,800 season ticket holders, 80 per cent of whom are from the area, say the move was forced on them after annual losses at Adams Park of about £3m took the club to within an hour of going out of business in 2010.

They have been tenants at the stadium since 2002, but gates average just over 6,000 and terms of their lease mean Wasps receive just 15p of

every pound supporters spend at the stadium on matchdays.

By taking a 50 per cent stake in the 32,000-capacity Ricoh Arena, with a view to increasing that share in the future, they hope to secure their long-term future.

However, Wycombe Wanderers admit Wasps' departure will mean the loss of a 'significant' revenue stream, and the town itself is likely to take a financial hit as well.

Wycombe District Council, who have said this week it wanted the club to stay, is not able to put an exact figure on it, but Coventry City Council leader, Councillor Ann Lucas said last week that a one-off match Wasps played at the Ricoh Arena in 2007 'brought about £6million into the local economy.'



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Wasps forward Nathan Hughes is one of the stars that will be moving to Coventry.

Wasps to leave

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Meanwhile, Claire Prosser, Policy Executive for Buckinghamshire Chamber of Commerce, said: "It's unfortunate news for Wasps fans and the High Wycombe local business community that the club has decided to move to Coventry.

"Although it is understandable that the decision has been made for financial reasons, the biggest impact will be felt by the hospitality sector in the area, which has served visitors to Adams Park for 12 years. We hope that the rest of the community will support the businesses affected."

Wasps were set on making High Wycombe their permanent base in 2010, when a new shared stadium with Wanderers at Booker was on the cards.

The council supported the proposals and Wasps said they 'had no Plan B' were the scheme to falter. There was fierce public opposition from many living near the proposed site, with a coalition of 16 associations, parish councils and interested groups forming the community action body GASP – Groups Against the Stadium Propos-

als – in 2010. The group mounted a number of protests against the plan.

The council's stance changed when Alex Collingwood replaced Lesley Clarke as leader, and WDC turned down the stadium plan in 2011. Wasps' then-owner Steve Hayes walked away and the club lurched between financial disasters until Irish businessman Derek Richardson took over last spring, citing a new stadium as his priority.

A number of councillors expressed regret the stadium scheme had been ditched at the time, however, including former deputy leader of WDC, Cllr Tony Green.

He said he thought the decision to axe the plan had been premature, adding: "The whole area would lose if Wasps disappeared, hopefully it won't come to that.

"I think it would be a massive blow, especially for the children who are trained in the Wasps community arena."

Meanwhile, Wanderers are offering Wasps season ticket holders free entry to three of their next five games.

More more reaction, see Sport pages 130-136



LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Colin
BAKER

Let's hope both teams flourish apart

When Wycombe District Council vetoed Steve Hayes' plans to create a stadium/sports complex in Wycombe to accommodate both of the teams he then owned – Wycombe Wanderers and Wasps, I suppose it was inevitable that the ground share arrangement between the clubs would be less secure. When the teams became separately owned the decree absolute became even more likely, given that Adams Park could not accommodate the crowds that Wasps could attract.

However it is undoubtedly true that the presence of Wasps in Wycombe has been of huge assistance in enabling Wanderers to survive the last few nail-biting years of financial and league insecurity. The net benefit to Wanderers has never been publicised – but there clearly was a fairly substantial annual amount in the coffers without which we may have followed the ever growing list of clubs that have gone into administration, had massive point deductions and sunk without trace through the conference and out the other side.

Mercifully the departure of Wasps in December coincides with a renaissance of form and ambition for Wanderers. If anything shows the wisdom of sticking with a manager and allowing him to develop a team – then Wanderers' necessary retention of Gareth Ainsworth despite the team tiptoeing to the edge of the precipice at the end of last season is a great example. As he gets better and better at the job, let's hope we can retain him as he and the team bounce from one end of the division last year to the top this year. The finances may tremble at the departure of Wasps, but if the crowds come back to see their local team battling with pride – successfully, it may not be so bad after all. And the new Chairman, Andrew Howard, seems encouragingly upbeat about the opportunity offered.

I feel sorry for the Wasps fans who now have to face a trek to the Midlands if they want to follow their team, turning all games into away matches. Many of them will be South Bucks Rugby fans, who started to support the team 12 years ago when they came out from London. Others will have been travelling from London to continue their support.

MK Dons eventually weathered the storm when they left Wimbledon, so Wasps have a strong enough brand to do the same. Let's hope both teams flourish apart. At least the Adams Park pitch will have a better chance of surviving the season!

■ **Colin Baker is best known as BBC's Doctor Who. He lives in High Wycombe with his family. See his archive of columns at bucksfreepress.co.uk**

Wasps decide that every fan counts but the numbers don't add up

Wasps will be home by Christmas – it just won't be a home that they or anyone associated with them will be familiar with.

Many moons ago I wrote an article suggesting High Wycombe was fortunate to have Wasps playing in its back garden and, with regards to Wycombe Wanderers, it didn't have to be a case of either/or.

I was roundly castigated by some sections of Wanderers fans for expressing such a view and that's fair enough.

However, the rugby club's 12-year stay in the town will soon draw to a close and, I may be proved wrong in the fullness of time, but to me it looks a bit like a lose/lose situation.

Wasps will essentially have to start from scratch when it comes

to building up a new fanbase to fill their 30,000-seater stadium.

And it only looks like bad news for the town too.

I don't subscribe to the view that this will prove terminal for Wanderers; even though a Wasps exit is a financial blow to a club without much economic leeway, I think they're in safe hands with Andrew Howard.

But High Wycombe itself can only have benefited from hosting top level sport for more than a decade.

The last five years have been pretty dismal, but their switch to Adams Park coincided with a glorious six-year spell during which they won two European and four English titles.

All told they won eight trophies here, brought the best players



Alan
FELDBERG
OPINION

from around the world to Adams Park and reached deep into surrounding schools and clubs with their community programmes.

The problem has been attendances. Just like Wanderers, they have struggled to get supporters through the turnstiles.

They have built a hardcore fanbase here of around 6,000, but without the revenues from owning their own stadium that is nowhere near enough and bankrolling £2m-£4m losses each year simply became unsustainable.

More's the pity.

But while we can all understand the financial logic of moving to the Ricoh Arena, the whole process has been poorly managed.

There has been no consultation, no discussion and, until the

deal was done, no news.

They talk about a partnership with fans. Well, this was a case of one partner saying to the other: "I'm going here, do you want to come?" rather than, "Where should we go?"

Once a Wasps always a Wasps, Every Fan Counts...the club are proud of these catchy slogans. But if every fan counts it still feels like the sums didn't add up and this has been a case of swapping supporters for sponsors.

Measuring the immeasurables is what's required now and High Wycombe will certainly lose out for their departure.

But what Wycombe might lose from this move might fade into nothing compared to what Wasps stand to lose.

@Alan_Feldberg

Wasps move creates angry backlash

WASPS fans tried to fight off the move to Coventry with a last-gasp online petition.

Nearly 3,000 fans signed it but by then the Ricoh Arena deal had just about been signed, sealed and delivered and whatever protests the club's fans had were too little, too late.

Among those against the move were a vast number of supporters from Bucks expressing concern the impact Wasps' exit would have on the area.

Malcolm Caudren: "This move would be disastrous for grass roots rugby in the Chilterns area as we receive an enormous amount of support from the Wasps community team."

Darren Smith: "Your nephew has a great future with Wasps!" was the statement used when I was talking to the Wasps Representative... the future will be crushed if Wasps move away from Bucks."

Stuart Holcroft: "Having so many amateur clubs align with Wasps since their move to High Wycombe, this would be a betrayal of those clubs' loyalty to Wasps."

Robert Wickham: "If the move to Coventry is confirmed, Wasps the club will be no more. They will simply become a franchise with no roots, no heritage, and no real fan base. I have had 14 fantastic years following Wasps. As far as I am concerned, this famous club will cease to exist should this move go through."

Anthony Armstrong: "If Wasps go to the Midlands, that will be the end of my support after 12 years. So "Every fan counts" does it?"

David Kappler: "Having followed Wasps since they came to Wycombe and now a box holder, a move to Coventry is a betrayal of the brand and deserves to fail."

Roy Wadsworth: "Respect the tradition of the club and, more importantly, the wishes of your supporters. Wasps is not a toy or plaything for selfish owners with no sense of tradition."

ONLINE BFP POLL:

Would you be disappointed to see Wasps leave High Wycombe?

Yes 44%
No 42%
Not bothered either way 15%

Coventry been on the cards since Booker fell through

WASPS have admitted that Adams Park never felt like home.

The club have been playing their home games at the stadium since 2002 and in 2010, when a new community stadium at Booker appeared to be on the cards, they said they wanted to make High Wycombe their permanent base and had 'no Plan B'.

However, all that changed once the stadium fell through and Wednesday's announcement was the result of years of scouring the country for a new venue.

Chief executive Nick Eastwood said: "This is a watershed moment for Wasps and the most important decision the club has ever taken."

"It's been nearly 20 years since we've had a permanent home ground and it feels like we've been on the road ever since."

"That was around the time rugby union went professional, bringing with it significant challenges. Some of those challenges were financial and proved almost insurmountable."

"We survived, but only just and it hasn't been easy. We had many days when we feared what the next day might bring, when our very existence was in doubt."

"That is why we have decided Coventry will be our permanent home,

'It's been nearly 20 years since we've had a permanent home ground and it feels like we've been on the road ever since.'

NICK EASTWOOD

somewhere where we will finally put down roots and become long-term members of the community.

"We are under no illusions about the task ahead and the sceptics we need to win over. It's up to us to prove we are in this for the long haul."

"It's not a decision we have taken lightly. It's the result of almost two years of detailed and comprehensive analysis but for the first time in a long time we look forward to the future with real hope."

"All clubs are in search of the holy grail of what is called the virtuous circle, where success on the field leads to success off the field, leading into greater investment on the field and so the circle turns."

"We believe that the move to the Ricoh is the first step in getting that virtuous circle turning."



Wasps chief executive Nick Eastwood admitted that Adams Park never felt like a permanent home.

Wasps: The spirit of the underdog only carries you so far

JAMES Haskell believes Coventry will be the saving of Wasps and that the club had grown weary of being the working class heroes of the Premiership.

For years they challenged the wealthiest clubs in the land without having anything like their financial clout, but while that formed the club's hard-nosed character in the time of Lawrence Dallaglio et al, Haskell says times

have moved on.

He said: "We always had the mentality that we weren't particularly privileged, we didn't have the best."

"But that made you hungry and angry to play and you went out there and worked hard on the field and off the field. That was the mentality."

"But that only works so long. The game has transformed since I first started playing. You need to

look after the guys now. The game is so much more attritional and there are so many more retirements. The game is going to kick on, the medical side, the fitness side, the business side...you need to be competitive in that environment. Coming to the Ricoh, we're now up there."

Haskell also believes that without the uncertainty off the field, the team will flourish on it.

He said: "Players should be

focused on rugby and everything else should take care of itself. Unfortunately at Wasps because we have had different owners and all these issues, that's become a problem."

"When guys turn up at rugby they should be concentrating on performance and playing. But at Wasps at times it's been, are we going to get paid? Where are we playing? What's the situation?"

"As of today, that's changed."

In their own words: Wasps answer some of the fans' questions:

Buying Adams Park:

We have enjoyed a good relationship with Wycombe Wanderers during our stay in High Wycombe. However, the ground is not suitable for our long-term requirements as a permanent home – it would need to be completely redeveloped.

The site simply isn't big enough. The infrastructure is not viable for what we need. The access is not efficient and there are no other revenue streams to rival what the Ricoh Arena offers.

Unfortunately attendances at Adams Park have not been as high as we would have wished, or as we need, to survive as a business in the professional era.

We need a bigger footprint to be able to build attendances. The Ricoh Arena also has a capacity that will allow us to host the knock out stages of European Rugby in the future (15,000 criteria).

Staying at Adams Park:

We run a high risk of going bust. It's as simple as that.

Adams Park was always intended as a short-term solution. The club doesn't make enough money in High Wycombe for it to be sustainable – for every £1 spent by supporters at Adams Park the club gets 15p.

Over the past 18 months our owner has absorbed almost £10m of the club's losses. We are losing approximately £3m every year.

We can't continue in that vein if we want the club to survive and succeed.

Eighteen months ago we were an hour away from administration, an hour from the club disappearing forever.

It is only thanks to our current owner that we are here today.

New stadium in Wycombe:

We as a club have been disappointed before, through the Booker Airfield project.

We came close to achieving our own home only for plans to fall through at the final hour, leaving our previous owner no choice but to walk away.

Staying where we are would mean continuing to lose £3m a year while awaiting planning permission elsewhere.

The green field sites we have explored have a low chance of success.

On average, securing planning consent, building new stadiums and the infrastructure they require takes ten years to come to fruition.



Supporters' reaction:

We value our supporters who have backed us through thick and thin, particularly over a challenging couple of years, and we understand this move will be disruptive.

We will do everything we can to help our supporters join us at our new home.

This will include free coach transport for season ticket holders from designated locations in High Wycombe for the rest of the season, as well as an upgrade in season ticket seat, an exclusive hospitality area for season ticket holders and free parking.

We understand supporters will feel passionately about the move, we have asked ourselves the same questions supporters are currently asking.

We'd ask our supporters to take a step back if they can and consider the positive opportunities this will give their team.

Other options:

One: Stay as we are, losing £3m a year with a high risk of going bust.

Two: Stay as we are, but cut the squad budget in half to survive financially.

Three: Find land to develop; suitable sites are not available and there is a very high degree of risk associated with planning consent falling through.

Four: Buy an existing stadium in the area; they are rarely, if ever, available.

The club is reliant on the financial support and goodwill of one individual.

We have to break this cycle.

The strength of this move is the combination of the parts – the conferences, music events, exhibitions.

The whole business makes money, which allows us to invest in our squad and attract world-class players.

Haskell issues emotional appeal

WASPS captain James Haskell admits he can understand the heartache of young fans who don't understand why their team is walking away from them.

However, he insists the alternative was going out of business or sinking down the leagues with a weak squad.

He said: "I'm a Wasps fan from the age of 12 and I followed them around the country.

"Now I'm the longest serving Wasps player and I've got intimate knowledge of where this club has been, how close we've been to disappearing, how many owners we've had and how long we've strived to find a home.

"We've left no stone unturned to trying to find that place but I don't think the fans know how close it got a number of times and how much of a struggle it's been. Fans have been shielded from that but it was very close."

It's understood that players and staff went unpaid more than once and at the lowest ebb even the most basic equipment had to be self-funded.

Haskell said: "It's obviously a massive change. But we were an hour away from going bankrupt, we're losing £3m a year, Derek [Richardson, owner] has come in and absorbed £10m worth of debt.

"If you're losing that amount of money you make cut backs and end up with a squad that can't compete.

"But we've done everything we can to keep Wasps where it should be.

"There was no other option. I know it's difficult to understand in the short-term and as a young fan it's difficult to explain the business side of it because it's the emotion.

"But we aren't a million miles away. This will only make the club better and we will do everything it can to take as many supporters with us as we can."

WASPS' MOVE AT A GLANCE:

- Wasps have bought a 50 per cent stake in the Ricoh Arena for about £20m.
- The Alan Edward Higgs Charity holds the other 50 per cent but Wasps are planning negotiations to increase their stake.
- Their first game at the Ricoh Arena will be against either London Irish or Castres in early December.
- Wasps will share the ground with Coventry City, with the football club playing on Saturday and Wasps on Sunday.
- The club will train at Acton for the remainder of this season and next season while a new state-of-the-art training site near the Ricoh Arena is identified.
- Season ticket holders will be offered free transport from High Wycombe to Coventry for home matches this season.
- Wasps have also announced major sponsorship deals with Land Rover and EMC.
- Wasps say the move was essential with annual losses between £2m and £4m, while they take just 15p of every pound spent on matchdays at Adams Park.

Young expecting a 'mixed reaction' at Adams Park

WASPS director of rugby Dai Young is preparing for a 'mixed reaction' from home fans for their remaining games at Adams Park.

They host Bath on Sunday with Harlequins, London Irish and London Welsh also due in Wycombe – and possible Casters in the Champions Cup – before the club decamps to Coventry.

Young said: "I expect a mixed reaction at Adams Park.

"But it's important now we speak to the supporters and explain the situation.

"It's not a decision we took lightly and we want to assure them that we want them to come on this journey with us and we'll do everything within our power to get them here.

"We feel this is the best decision for Wasps to be about in 15, 20, 30, 40 years. The alternative doesn't

bear thinking about."

And Young insists that not only does the move stave off the threat of going out of business, but it offers a platform from which the club can reclaim its former glories.

He said: "To play in a world class facility will help us retain players and attract world stars.

"You can't help but be impressed when you walk into this arena. It blows you away a little bit.

"We've got to do the job on the field, but we are really excited about playing our first game here.

"It will also help us invest in the infrastructure of the club, making sure we have the right number of physios and the right support team to make sure the preparation is second to none.

"The next step is the training facilities and we want to build the best in the Premiership."

Once a Wasp always a Wasp? We realise we are testing that sentiment

WASPS admit moving to the Ricoh Arena will test the loyalty of their fans to the limit, but insist they were left with no option.

Wasps will play four, possibly five games at Adams Park before upping sticks and relocating to Coventry in December.

They leave behind a hardcore fanbase of about 6,000 supporters, of which about 40 per cent are season ticket holders from the South Bucks area.

Expecting those fans to follow them 80 miles away is a giant leap of faith, and chief executive officer Nick Eastwood admits that losing supporters will be an inevitable part of the move.

He said: "We have a motto at the club among players and supporters, Once a Wasp Always a Wasp. We realise we are testing that sentiment, and significantly so.

"We would dearly love that spirit to shine through but we understand it's not possible for all.

"Our message to current Wasps

by **ALAN FELDBERG**

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fans is this: We want you to come with us and be part of this incredibly exciting future.

"You have backed this club through thick and thin and we value that support tremendously. I know we have tested your patience recently, unavoidably I might add, and now we're testing your support.

"But we have finally ended the uncertainty over our future and put ourselves in a position to compete at the highest levels again. "We want our current supporters to be there sharing that with us."

Wasps will hope to convince fans to follow them by providing free coaches from High Wycombe on matchdays for the remainder of the season.

And Eastwood even believes that the greater access at the Ricoh Arena will make it a shorter day for Wasps fans than going to sup-



Wasps expect to shed fans moving to Coventry.

port their team at Adams Park.

He said: "We've got 2,800 season ticket holders. About 80 per cent of them live within a 30 minute drive of Adams Park.

"Adams Park is a notoriously difficult place to get in and out of. It is the end of a cul-de-sac and you're talking an hour to an hour and a half getting in and out.

"If you work out the time when a family leaves and gets back [12am-

6pm], the ease at the Ricoh Arena means their rugby day is likely to be no longer and in many instances will be shorter.

"Obviously they'll have to travel and this means cost, but we'll put together what we believe is a very attractive offer for our season ticket holders to come and support us. That will include free coach transport and other aspects of subsidised travel."

Wycombe Council 'really wanted' Wasps to stay in High Wycombe

TIME will tell if High Wycombe's loss is Coventry's gain, but Wycombe District Council have responded to the news of Wasps departure by admitting they 'really wanted' the club to stay in the town.

In a statement issued yesterday (Thursday), Cllr Richard Scott, Leader of Wycombe District Council, said: "We really are very sorry to hear that Wasps will be leaving High Wycombe this year.

"Not only have they built-up a loyal fan base within the area, but they've also made a significant

contribution to grass roots rugby in particular and wider community life in general.

"I don't make light of the fact that we really wanted Wasps to stay in High Wycombe.

"I met with their chief executive on a number of occasions to discuss options for their future at Adams Park.

"During all of these discussions, the club made it very clear that that were looking for an improved match day experience for their fans and it's obviously disappointing that this is not

something that they felt they could pursue at Adams Park.

"We would like to thank Wasps for their contribution to the Wycombe district over the last 12 years and wish them the best of luck for the future."

However, while a proposed new stadium at Booker didn't get as far as the planning application stage, some comments on the BFP website suggest fans think the council are at least partly to blame.

Wearywasp said: "Tragic but the council in Coventry had a bigger vision than the narrow mind-

ed councillors and people of Wycombe.

"Understand why the club chose this. Heartbroken tonight."

Kania said: "It's a pity to see you go, wish you the very best in the future. It's a pity the local council have not allowed provision for a well sited stadium in the area."

Grumpyaskett said: "A really sad time but it was so obvious once our councillors backtracked on the Booker deal and previously refused easier access to Adams Park."



WHY WE'RE MOVING

You may recently have read or heard that Wasps has acquired a significant interest in the Ricoh Arena in Coventry and from December this will be our new home. We would dearly love you to join us there. We don't want to leave our supporters behind, we want to take you with us.

These are very exciting times for the Club, and we wanted to let you know this decision has not been taken lightly and explain why this had to happen.

Wasps is a club with nearly 150 years of history, we have been searching for a permanent 'home' for the Club ever since the game went professional. It's been almost 20 years since we left Sudbury. Two years ago we were within an hour of going into administration and losing our club forever. If it wasn't for our current owner stepping in, there wouldn't be a Wasps, simple as that.

We are currently losing £3million a year. This will not change unless we have our own home. We can't rely on a single benefactor to support us while we build a stadium which could take many years to come to fruition, if at all. We've seen before with the Booker Airfield redevelopment project how plans can fall through at the last moment. This gave our previous owner no choice but to walk away.

By moving to the Ricoh Arena, Wasps are taking steps to guarantee the long term success of the Club. This move will give us the financial stability the Club has craved for years and a solid foundation for world class rugby to be played and enjoyed in world class surroundings. Our ambition is to re-establish the Club as one of the best teams in Europe.

We have explored all available options and this is by far the best for our long-term future. It's the only one which fulfils all of our requirements. This is a unique, once in a lifetime opportunity, to guarantee success by underpinning our sporting ambitions with a solid business model.

We understand there will be challenges and that is why we will do everything we can to ease the transition and help you join us at our new home. We are offering current Season Ticket Holders free coach travel from designated locations in the High Wycombe and West London area for the rest of the season. Season Ticket Holders will also enjoy an upgrade in seat and exclusive access to a hospitality lounge at the Ricoh. There are many more benefits which will be communicated to you, along with the date of an open day at our new home so you can see it for yourself.

For more information about what this move will mean for you please call 0844 225 9555 or visit www.wasps.co.uk

Nick Eastwood, Wasps CEO