

Feeling Champion

DULWICH HAMLET

Dulwich Hamlet have become known for drawing attendances that would not look out of place three divisions higher. Even so, pulling in a crowd of 1,200 for a midweek Isthmian League match is quite a feat. The queue snaking from the turnstiles at Champion Hill through the car park of the adjoining Sainsbury's before the league leaders' game against Harrow Borough, however, was a direct response by supporters to the club's call for help in keeping Dulwich in business.

The position Dulwich find themselves in is complex but in essence familiar. They do not own their ground and the company that does, property developers Meadow Residential, effectively controls the running of the club through an arrangement with the owner, DHFC Ltd's majority shareholder Nick McCormack. In late October, Meadow notified the club's football committee that due to the local council's continued resistance to their plans to turn the ground into flats they would be withdrawing their support for player wages and other outgoings. This left the club and their supporters needing to pick up the bill.

The fans who fill Champion Hill are community-minded, many taking pride in living in this part of London after moving to the area as students. They tend to be politically active and, certainly by non-League standards, they are young. The land Champion Hill sits on, though, is even more valuable than it was when the original ground was demolished to make way for a supermarket in the early 1990s. The Labour council in Southwark has demonstrated an admirable commitment

to protecting affordable housing by blocking Meadow's plans but, in so doing, the football club's existence is threatened. To some degree, Dulwich's location is both their strength and their weakness.

Expressing disappointment if not surprise at Meadow's actions in his programme notes for the Harrow fixture on November 14, Dulwich chairman Liam Hickey said: "We have always believed that the situation we now face may occur should Meadow Residential fail with their plans." The developers putting their needs first is a possibility the club have been braced for since 2014, when Dulwich's previous brush with extinction was averted after Meadow and their forerunners, Hadley Property Group, purchased the ground.

Meadow had always said they would help Dulwich enter fan ownership and move into a new stadium nearby. Nonetheless, aligning the club's long-term future with the interests of a business primarily concerned with

turning a profit on the land the team play on always seemed an uncomfortable fit even while the team remained successful. Given the latest threat to the club's future, though, it is reasonable to ask whether Dulwich would have been better off without Meadow in the first place. One Champion Hill regular, Robert

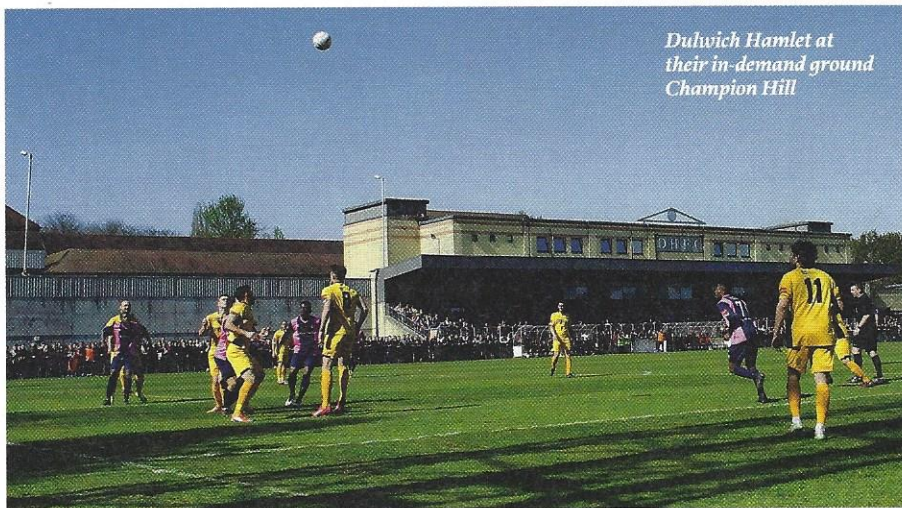
Vaughn, concedes he might be in the minority but makes an honest admission: "In retrospect, given a choice between going bust in 2014 and going bust now, I'd go for 2014. The hard work of setting up a phoenix club would already have been done."

The effort it takes to run a non-League club is certain but the amount of money it should cost, at least in Dulwich's case, less so.

In Meadow's own statement they claimed to be putting more than £170,000 per year into the club to meet expenses. For their part, the club's football committee said they needed more information about the finances and more control over their management before they could properly tackle the responsibility of handling them. But some might wonder why a club like Dulwich, with home gates well above average for their division and an income supplemented by merchandise and a packed bar on matchdays, should need anybody else's money. "Basically, if Dulwich can't be sustainable then the vast majority of football clubs in this country might as well throw in the towel," Vaughn adds.

Fan ownership remains the supporters' trust's main objective along with a secure home in East Dulwich. Only then will the club be fully in control of their own running and, with support from the local council with regards to where to build a new ground if necessary, their own future. What impact fan ownership would have on Dulwich's budget is not determined but their fanbase should be enough to support financial stability in their current division, if they survive the situation with Meadow. Ambitions to reach the National League South might be tempered for a time but the fans would know their club was being run with their interests put first.

William Abbs



Dulwich Hamlet at their in-demand ground Champion Hill

OFFSIDE



"It's a fine old winter tradition: failing clubs swapping failing managers"

DAVE ROBINSON

Graphic details Football's hard news made easy

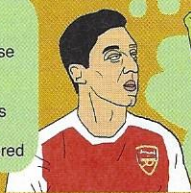
WHAT DO THEY REALLY (REALLY) WANT?

Wenger struggles to understand his wantaway stars



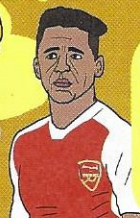
OZIL

A comfy armchair in the dressing room that no one else is allowed to use, personal minders in the tunnel before matches, big hugs from all his team-mates several times a game, not just when he's scored



SANCHEZ

Trophies - lots of them, Premier League, La Liga, Champions League, Highbury Darts League, Dog Owner of the Year, Most Improved Performer: National Arm Wrestling League, Southern Area Rhumba Gold Medallist



TIM BRADFORD