



## Gareth Ainsworth: 'People have said cut your hair and you'll get a big job'

Wycombe's manager on leading his miracle-making team in the Championship and why his rock-god style is here to stay



Gareth Ainsworth is the longest-serving manager across all four divisions in England as well as one of the most unique. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian

"I'm not sure many managers know the inner workings of a sprinkler system and can fix it by bending wires and with bits of coat-hanger," Gareth Ainsworth says with a wry smile as he looks around [Wycombe](#) Wanderers' training ground while tugging thoughtfully at his rock-god hair. "But we do here. We pitch in. I'm often seen with a wheelbarrow out here. We don't have a full-time groundsman but we have rabbits.

"One night a rabbit may dig a hole in my training pitch. I could get on the phone and rant at the groundsman and he would come half-an-hour later and be pissed off with me. Or I could get a shovel and, using some soil, fill the rabbit hole myself. I'll do it because it's easier and it's the right thing to do."



**Gareth Ainsworth makes Wycombe unlikely Wembley headliners**

Ainsworth [is a Championship manager](#) now and, on Saturday, his incredible run with Wycombe will continue as they face another promoted club, Rotherham, in the opening match of a new season. This is the first time Wycombe have climbed as high as the second tier of English football and they owe much to Ainsworth, who is one of the most interesting men in the game. He is also the longest-serving manager across all four divisions in England having led Wycombe since 2012.

Simon Weaver has been in his role three years longer but Harrogate have just been promoted to League Two – so this season marks the Yorkshireman's debut as a league manager. Ainsworth, a 47-year-old from Blackburn, is a more grizzled pro with a sustained capacity for surprise. Apart from driving an orange Mustang, fronting his rock group [Cold Blooded Hearts](#), loving Jim Morrison and living his life according to a Kurt Cobain quote that "I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I am not", Ainsworth bought some of the training ground nets on eBay and tore down his living room curtains so they could block out the sunlight in Wycombe's video analysis office.

That last snippet comes from Neil Harman's [absorbing book](#). Close Quarters: An Extraordinary Season on the Brink offers a rare, behind-the-scenes account of Wycombe's rise from near bankruptcy and an apparently inevitable relegation to League Two to promotion and an uplifting story for our Covid times. There are many fascinating characters at Wycombe but Ainsworth is at the heart of the club. When Wycombe [beat Oxford 2-1 at Wembley in the play-off final](#) in July a large flag behind the dugout paid homage to their rocker of a manager: "Wild Thing ... I Think I Love You."

In person, the Wild Thing is an intelligent and measured man. "The curtains were coming down anyway," he says. "I didn't go home and just cut them up. We needed new curtains and so things accelerated. The curtains were hanging in my house one day and hanging here the next day. It's a true story but there is logic."

### **[I don't know if anyone has been promoted to the Championship without having paid for a player](#)**

The most startling aspect of Wycombe's story is captured when Ainsworth says, almost casually: "I don't know if anyone has been promoted to the Championship without having paid for a player. It would be a nice accolade if it's going."

Ainsworth is rightly proud of the bizarre fact that, during his long tenure as manager, "I don't think we ever paid for anyone up front. There may have been appearance fees to QPR when we took Michael Harriman [on loan for 20 games in 2013]. There have been loans, free transfers and swap deals, but since I took over we've never had the opportunity to pay a transfer fee until now – even if we've sold a hell of a lot of players."

In football's absurdly inflated transfer market it's remarkable that Ainsworth has guided Wycombe to the Championship without buying any players the last eight seasons. The purchase last week of two new players with Championship experience is a new trend. "We've signed Ryan Tafazolli from Hull and Daryl Horgan from Hibs. Daryl is my biggest-ever signing because we've actually paid a bit of cash for him. It's not an astronomical amount."

When I ask Ainsworth how much he paid for Horgan, an Irish winger who played a season in the Championship for Preston before spending two years with Hibs, he smiles. "It's undisclosed. But it's fantastic players like Daryl and Ryan would even consider Wycombe. I spoke to a goalkeeper the other day and he said: 'Is that all you can pay?' I said: 'We're Wycombe. You have to understand where we've come from.'"

In June 2019 Ainsworth had only seven outfield players in his squad on the first day of pre-season. It needed the unexpected arrival of an American investor, Rob Couhig from New

Orleans, [to save the club](#). Ainsworth's annual playing budget had been slashed to £1.15m – which a Premier League superstar will earn in a month. “It had been £1.5m and the club took 30% off to stay afloat. But then Rob came in and I said. ‘If you get me that budget back I’ll give you a League One side next year.’ He did it but said: ‘No heart attacks, I don’t want to be going out of this league.’”



Wycombe's players and manager celebrate their League One play-off final victory over Oxford at Wembley in July. Photograph: Andrew Kearns/CameraSport/Getty Images

“I didn’t keep us in League One. But we went into the Championship and Rob and his nephew, Pete, have offered me great support. They know I don’t want to sign a megastar who is going over the top of everybody in our dressing room. Even if we had the money it wouldn’t be right. I like my generals [his 36-year-old captain Matt Bloomfield, who has made over 500 appearances for Wycombe] and [Adebayo Akinfenwa](#) [the club’s most recognisable character] to run the dressing room. That’s key to survival this season.”

Akinfenwa is so charismatic that Jürgen Klopp [invited him](#) to Liverpool’s title parade – while Wycombe’s intriguing squad includes Ryan Allsop, the goalkeeper who took a stand against homophobic abuse, and Joe Jacobson and Scott Kashket, two of the very few Jewish players in English football.

Ainsworth’s leadership underpinned Wycombe’s achievement in winning promotion ahead of famous old clubs like Sunderland and Ipswich. After the season was brought to a shuddering halt by Covid-19, Wycombe, who had been in the top two most of the campaign, had slipped to eighth. Yet with a game in hand, Ainsworth was convinced they would still make the play-offs once the league table was readjusted. “I knew the points-per-game system would put us in third. There were more important things going on but I also worried we’d worked so damned hard to get where we were, up in the top two more than any other team this season. It would be typical Wycombe that, in the one season something amazing could happen, a global pandemic comes in.”

### **The rave scene up north was big but I always stuck to rock ‘n’ roll**

They played Fleetwood Town, [who are bankrolled](#) by the multi-millionaire Andy Pilley, away in the first leg of their play-off semi-final. Harman quotes the pre-game speech Ainsworth made in full. It’s an illuminating insight made all the more persuasive by the way in which Ainsworth moves beyond football to lift his players.

“I wrote three speeches for all three play-offs and I’m not usually a Churchillian guy,” Ainsworth says, “but I wrote the Fleetwood away speech in my room just before the game. I told them the lockdown had reset everybody’s values and how we had been reminded of

what's important – our families and each other. We had been talking to each other all through lockdown and we had a stronger bond than ever.”

Wycombe scored in the opening minute of that first game back, after a 133-day break, and they secured a 4-1 away win which set them up for Wembley and the game which took them into the Championship. Ainsworth savoured that final victory but he and his assistant Richard Dobson also felt briefly overwhelmed. “Me and Dobbo looked at each other and said: ‘What have we done?’ It was incredible.”

Gareth Ainsworth is also lead singer for his band The Cold Blooded Hearts. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian

Ainsworth is proud that his first game away in the Championship will take Wycombe to Blackburn – his home town. “Growing up I was different,” he recalls. “In the north-west it was dance parties, garage and acid house. The rave scene up north was big but I always stuck to rock ‘n’ roll. I was still a popular guy because of football but I stuck to who I was. I’m the same today. Ask the players and they will say the gaffer comes in and gives a little whoop as I get the music on in the gym every day. I’m a real believer there’s always some positive to find. I’m not being righteous. I just try to be an example to the boys.”

Everything could have gone wrong in 2014 when Wycombe almost dropped out of the Football League. Instead, on the final day of the League Two season, they beat Torquay away to avoid potential catastrophe. “If we’d lost that game I don’t think the club would exist now – never mind me not having got another job in football. I would have been responsible as the manager who finished Wycombe. All the work everyone had done to get this club in the league, especially when Martin O’Neill was manager, would have been lost. You would not believe our finances then. It was real chaos.”

There is calm rather than chaos at the training ground today but Ainsworth concedes: “I’m going to need the first few games to work this out because it’s totally uncharted territory for me and this club in the Championship. But I’m hoping we’ll surprise people. We’ve got momentum and something different. I look at Sheffield United, Bournemouth and Burnley and I’m in awe of those clubs and what they have done. But they are big, historic football clubs and we’re not. I’m really looking forward to a hell of a challenge and we’ll make sure everyone remembers Wycombe in the Championship.”

### **There won’t be any hair cutting, believe me. This is me**

Ainsworth has been interviewed for jobs at bigger clubs – Sunderland being an example – but he has not been taken seriously by many who still see his long hair before his managerial acumen. “So many people in football have said to me: ‘Cut your hair. You’d look smarter and get a big job.’ I’m thinking: ‘But that’s not me.’ I’m going to do it my way. It takes time and patience. But more fool them if they still think: ‘There’s that long-haired dude on the touchline.’”

His ambition is obvious. “I would love to manage in the Premier League. I always used to talk about the Championship as being out of reach for Wycombe. I’ve got to eat those words because we’re there now. It gives me fuel to make the next step because I would love to manage at the highest level. It would be an absolute dream to do it with Wycombe.”

If he can’t achieve another impossible dream with Wycombe would he accept an offer from a Premier League club if they said the job was his on the condition that he cut his hair? Ainsworth shakes his head. “There won’t be any hair cutting, believe me. This is me.”

He looks up and, once his laughter fades, says it again. “This is me.”

*Close Quarters by Neil Harman is published by Pitch*