

DOING THE 92

The tech billionaire rebuilding a football club from the ground up

Wycombe's new owner has billions of pounds. He's choosing to spend it on a training ground and an academy to make this last forever



Wycombe might prove to be English football's most interesting club in 2025 (Photo: Getty)



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Wycombe Wanderers always knew that change was inevitable.

In October 2019, Gareth Ainsworth became the longest-serving manager in the Football League when Jim Bentley left Morecambe. Ainsworth would remain so for a further three-and-a-half years, an emphatic exception in every way. He would probably smile at the description.

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To say that Ainsworth sculpted Wycombe as he saw fit is an understatement. It wasn't just that he brought second-tier football to this club for the first time in its history (the great lament is that their sole Championship season was played entirely behind closed doors).

He gave his team, his club, an identity as vivid as anywhere else in the country. As one club employee put it to me: "We were the Crazy Gang of the 21st century".

The style of play smacked you in the face: direct football up to Adebayo Akinfenwa for him to hold the ball up; deliberately sacrificed possession and then counter attacks; set-piece success; ultimate commitment to holding onto leads; a preference for experienced players, often older than 33.

This was underdog football at an underdog club and thus perfect harmony was established. It peaked in the League One play-off final at Wembley against Oxford United, the highest average possession and shortest passers in the division against the lowest. Ainsworth's team had 24 per cent of the ball and won 2-1.

So when Ainsworth was approached by, and left for, Queens Park Rangers in February 2023, Wycombe were a blank canvas football team. The call was made instantly to send for a club legend. Matt Bloomfield had spent 19 years as a player at Adams Park and never played a league game for any other club. He had started his coaching badges here when still playing and then taken his first steps in management at Colchester United.



The Wanderers are punching firmly above their weight in League One (Photo: Getty)

When Wycombe put in the call, Bloomfield jumped at the chance. Bloomfield played more than half of his career under Ainsworth; he cherished the earthiness and grit of his former manager's style and retained deep respect for him. But he also knew that Wycombe now had the chance to be something different and that his own principles of possession and attacking prolificacy could work.

There were trying times for Bloomfield. Last season, he came fairly close to the sack after a run of one win in 17 games and Wycombe ended the season in tenth having been just outside the relegation zone at the end of January. But this season, Wycombe are League One's top scorers and they now average more possession than their opponents. For those of us who watched the Ainsworth era, it takes some getting used to.

Then, at the end of last season, the moment that might just change Wycombe's future for good. Owner Rob Couhig announced that he had accepted a deal for Mikhail Lomtadze to buy 90 per cent of Wycombe Wanderers.

Couhig initially remained on as chairman as agreed, with Dan Rice (a former employee at multiple Premier League clubs who knew Lomtadze) appointed as chief football officer. But when Couhig became involved as a bidder for Reading, Rice became the chairman.

I'm going to guess that you might have preconceptions of how a Georgian-Kazakh tech billionaire might operate after buying a lower-league football club.

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Lomtadze has an estimated worth of £4.5bn and his company Kaspi.kz is the most valuable public company in Kazakhstan.

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I'll happily concede that I expected lavish spending and for Bloomfield to lose his job.

As the five words from one Wycombe fan on Reddit said when introducing the news: "I am a bit scared".

We both owe Lomtadze an apology.

"Our goal is to achieve long-term success both on and off the pitch whilst building a financially sustainable club," the new owner said at the point of his takeover.

"The football world is evolving very fast and our priority will be to integrate data analytics and technology to elevate the club's performance to new levels.

"I am also a strong believer in youth development and it will be fundamental to the club's vision."

This summer, Wycombe signed two players for transfer fees, deals worth around £100,000 in total. Their top scorer is Richard Kone, a 21-year-old striker picked up from the Essex Senior League and who played at the Homeless World Cup in 2019. The entire transfer fee cost of Wycombe's first-team squad is not much more than £250,000.

While free-spending [Birmingham City](#) will likely win the title - something Bloomfield himself concedes - Wycombe are punching above their weight again with the 10th biggest budget in the division. The loan market was used and the data analytics model will aid recruitment in January.

Lomtadze finds a football club in a fascinating position. High Wycombe is a town of around 175,000 people but the average attendance this season is just over 5,100, lower than 14 clubs in the division below. Adams Park sits at the end of an industrial estate on the literal edge of the town's boundaries and getting away post-match is beastly. Put simply: it's easy to support Arsenal or Chelsea around here.

Wycombe Wanderers 0-1 Huddersfield Town

- **Game no.:** 53/92
- **Miles:** 224
- **Cumulative miles:** 8,849
- **Total goals seen:** 147
- **The one thing I'll remember in May:** All very well parking your car at the top of a hill if it isn't snowy and you have to walk back to it at 10pm. Like *It's A Knockout!* does the Alps.

A multibillionaire owner could chase this dream quite quickly: the man who brought the town around its football club. You sign some big-name players, have light shows before games (Coughig did indeed introduce post-game fireworks), sign a documentary deal and invite some celebrity influencers down to drum up notoriety. Or you can choose to rebuild a football club from the bottom up.

At the beginning of this season, Wycombe announced that they had agreed a deal to move into the Harlington facilities in West London that had previously been used as a training base by Chelsea and Queens Park Rangers. Harlington has 18 full-size pitches, AstroTurf pitches, gym, canteen, changing rooms, offices, workrooms and meeting rooms.

I'm labouing the point for a reason. Wycombe's previous training ground, Marlow Road, served a purpose and you might even argue that it fit the image of the Ainsworth underdog army spirit.

But when Bloomfield's team were in a sticky patch last winter, neither of the two pitches at Marlow Road were playable and a League One club was left ringing around for a place to train. That is no longer good enough.

The second half of this attempted masterplan was announced in September, when Wycombe formally took the next step towards launching a new academy that will be based at Harlington. That is symbolic here: in 2012, Wycombe closed their academy over financial restraints and the potential impacts of the new Elite Player Performance Plan.

The first task is to achieve Category Four status for the start of next season, but the longer vision is for Wycombe to have a Category One academy - the highest level - within five years. The location of the training ground becomes crucial, for it gives Wycombe a far greater chance of attracting talent from across London.

In October, the academy held its first "Talent ID Day" to recruit players for the first Under-18 squad, marked with a five-a-side competition between invited teams from local private academies. It was a line in the sand and the start of something those involved believe will become special.



Matt Bloomfield is held in high regard at Adams Park. (Photo: Getty)

To become a Category One academy is not easy. It requires significant investment in infrastructure, personnel and may well require Wycombe to be playing in a higher division, although that is not a necessary prerequisite.

A number of positions have already been filled: academy director Jeremy Sauer and academy head of recruitment Nathan Marshall recruited from Brighton, Harry Hudson as U18s head coach from Brentford. Sauer in particular is seen as a coup at this level.

The idea is that the three elements of Wycombe will go hand in hand. There will presumably be money to spend on players, recruited using the analytics model that will be seeking out bargains to sell on when developed - last week they announced the signing of Danish central defender Anders Hagelskjaer from Norwegian club Molde. The training ground will make the club more attractive to potential signings and to parent clubs of loanees and make the development process more efficient.



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And then the academy will allow Wycombe to attract young talent with the promise of pathways to the first team, allow the club to generate trading revenue to reinvest and potentially hold onto that talent for a little longer while they develop and thus gain in value.

Doing the 92, mapped

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This will take time, probably lots of time. This week, there have been strong suggestions that Bloomfield will look to take the manager's job at Luton Town in the Championship. It may not be a step up of many places in the league ladder, but you can see why he thinks it is a bigger pool for him to make his own name.

Even before the Bloomfield reports, going up to the Championship this season would represent ludicrous overachievement this early in the project. There are eight former Premier League clubs in League One and that doesn't include the upwardly mobile [Wrexham](#) and [Stockport County](#).

Without Bloomfield, Wycombe would indeed need to consolidate and work out who is best to take on this project. But they have a stable basis now, a plan in place and they will be attractive to potential replacements. As they have always known: change is inevitable.

And what is the rush? Wycombe only became an EFL club for the first time in their history in 1993. They have had one second-tier season. They can boast two famous cup runs, but those are the only occasions in Wycombe's history that they have gone beyond the fourth round in the FA Cup or Carabao Cup. If running before they are ready to walk is going to make the end product less effective or less efficient, why do it?

It may sound a little fanciful to talk of Wycombe's potential when only a several thousand people are watching on when the home team has a chance to go top of the league. But then if the billionaire owner was buying strikers for £10m, people would be lauding the grand ambition.

Ambition has multiple heads, you see. Your club's very rich owner has two options within the EFL's lower reaches. They can build something for your predilection as soon as possible, or they can try to build something that may be championed in 10 or 20 years' time.

As this project gets going in earnest – and even allowing for a little hyperbole – the evidence is persuasive. Wycombe might prove to be English football's most interesting club in 2025.

Daniel Storey has set himself the goal of visiting all 92 grounds across the Premier League and EFL this season. You can follow his progress via our interactive map and find every article (so far) [here](#)

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